

HELENA ROOKWOOD  
ELM VINCE



# PROMISE OF THORNS

A COURT OF FAIRY TALES  
BOOK THREE

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HELENA ROOKWOOD



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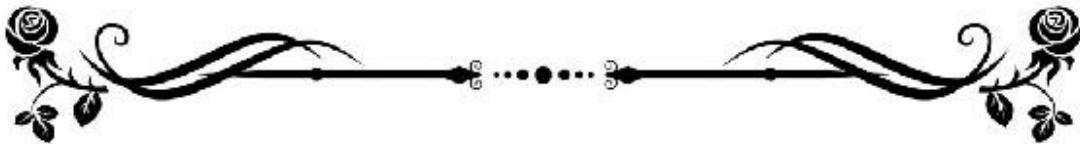
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A PROMISE  
OF  
THORNS

A COURT OF FAIRY TALES  
BOOK THREE

HELENA ROOKWOOD AND ELM VINCE

# CHAPTER ONE



THE DRESS TIGHTENED around my middle.

Two green-haired woodland nymphs giggled behind me as they tugged at the fastenings, drawing in the masses of material at my waist. I stared into the mirror opposite, my lips pressed tightly together, my wet hair cool where it dripped down between my shoulder blades.

I'd been in the Forest Court less than an hour, and already I was transformed.

The gown the nymphs had dressed me in was a human style, with a corset and flowing, mottled green skirts. But the soft material was stitched to look like the intricate veining of a leaf, a distinctly fae design.

Most importantly, I was *clean*. The grime of my Sky Court imprisonment had been scrubbed from every inch of me, and I now smelled of mint and rosemary.

*But is it enough to make me look like the Queen of Faerie?*

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the rattling in my chest. Thorne and I had shadowed straight here from the Sky Court. In the Forest Court, I would be staking my claim for the fae throne...and hopefully winning some allies.

At least the lush green smell of the trees and the woody bark were like a balm after months trapped in the bright, soulless Sky Court for the Alder Trials.

I breathed in slowly again. Everything in this room was made from wood —the paneling, the floorboards, the furniture—but every so often, flickers of greenery sprouted from a beam or shelf, reminding me I wasn't surrounded by dead timber but living trees. It made me think of the Cursed Court, where I'd first met Thorne.

I tilted my face to the quiet, greenish light filtering in through the windows then closed my eyes, listening to the trill of birdsong and the rush of the wind through the branches.

My moment of peace was quickly snatched away from me.

Visions of emaciated servants filled my mind, the ensorcelled Tithe humans made to fight to the death at the night of the Winter Solstice ball.

Mosswhistle and the handmaids Faolan had assigned me, Bethel and Mariyad, had hopefully gotten some of them out of the Sky Court during the coronation...but what would happen now Faolan wore the Alder Crown? Would he hunt them down before they could cross the border into the Forest Court's lands?

I bit down on my lip. Folk knew what Faolan would do to humans now that he could change the laws of the Kingdom. I hated the Tithes, but at least they had meant that free humans were protected by the Treaty.

My eyes snapped open, and I swallowed hard. That was exactly why I was doing this—preparing to challenge Faolan for the crown. As long as Faolan—as long as *any* fae—sat on the throne, humans would never be free of the Tithes, would never be seen as equals of the fae.

But I was going to change that.

In the mirror, a dark figure appeared in the doorway behind me. My gaze fixed on the outline of the tall, breathtaking fae I would recognize anywhere. My heart swelled, my corset straining.

“You look quite at home already, petal.” Thorne’s lips curled into a half-smile, revealing a flash of white canines.

“As do you.” I spoke into the mirror, not quite daring to turn around and face such impossible beauty in the flesh.

Thorne wore fresh clothes, a crushed pine-green doublet slashed with black. His dark hair shone, tousled as if he’d just casually run his hand through it and it had fallen perfectly. On his brow, he wore a small, bronze circlet of alder leaves.

He looked like a prince of the Forest Court.

As he strode toward me, his own gaggle of woodland nymphs flowed in behind him like a cape, whispering and laughing as they polished his buttons and picked specks of dust from his sleeves with long fingers.

My shoulders dropped, some of the anxiety leaving me now that Thorne was at my side. I leaned up on my tiptoes to brush a kiss against his lips, but the nymphs attending to me tutted, pulling me back by the laces of my corset.

Thorne stepped back, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Are you ready?”

“Nearly, Your Majesty,” the nymphs answered for me, trilling in unison.

I picked up a damp strand of hair in explanation, shrugging apologetically.

“Ah, yes.” Thorne moved to sit in a tall chair growing out of the floor. He sank against the backrest, garlanded by flowers. “We can’t possibly present the Queen of Faerie with wet hair.” He crossed one long leg over the other.

“Not when she’s about to meet another queen,” I muttered. I was not looking forward to explaining everything that had happened at the Sky Court to the fae I’d just widowed when I’d poisoned her husband.

The smile dropped from Thorne’s face. “My mother’s the one we have to win over,” he agreed in a murmur.

I laughed nervously. “I’d think that of all the fae we have to convince, your own mother should be the easiest.”

*At least, I hope she will be.*

We needed fae allies if we hoped to win the throne. Challenging Faolan on our own was too risky. We had no idea if he could use the Alder Crown to compel other fae to bend to his will...and we also couldn’t be sure that the crown would work for me instead, since I was human.

But with the Forest Court on our side, we could start to win support from the other Courts, to challenge Faolan’s rule.

“I’ve barely spoken with my mother since my curse was broken.” Thorne scrubbed a hand over his chin. “And even before I was cursed, I had no taste for Court politics. Mother disapproved of my attitude.”

“That’s changed,” I said firmly. “She’ll see you’re different now.”

Thorne twisted the signet ring on his little finger. “Aster, *you’re* the one with the claim to the throne. You won the Trials. You killed the Alder King.”

“But we’re going to rule together—me ruling the humans, and you ruling the fae.” I swallowed. “As long as we can convince her that my claim to the throne is legitimate, the Forest Court stand to do very well out of this, too.”

Thorne nodded, although his smile was thin. “Let’s just hope my mother is in a receptive mood. Without her backing, we can’t take this to the rest of the Court.”

One of the nymphs produced a silver comb and ran it through my damp locks, my hair drying in perfect, soft waves in its wake.

I watched in amazement, the casual magic distracting me from my nerves.

“Is it enchanted?”

I knew enchanters lived alongside the fae of the Forest Court. Hidden—up until I had revealed their existence in the Alder Trials.

The nymphs didn't answer my question, simply giggled and continued transforming my tangled locks. After only a few sweeps of the comb, my mahogany hair poured over my shoulder in glossy waves.

“Is she ready *now*?” Thorne addressed the nymphs directly this time, a nervous, impatient edge creeping into his voice.

They nodded, backing away and lowering their heads. “Yes, Your Highness. She's ready.”

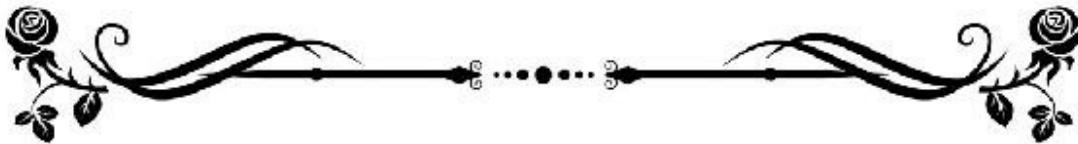
I studied my reflection in the mirror.

My short imprisonment at Faolan's hand had hollowed my cheeks, but my lilac eyes blazed, distracting from the darker purple shadows beneath them. The corseted dress accentuated my curves, showing off my décolletage.

Despite everything, I felt strong.

And I needed to look it if we were going to convince the forest queen that I was here not only as Thorne's partner, but as Queen of Faerie.

## CHAPTER TWO



THORNE LED me through corridors of dark, smooth wood lit only by softly glowing faelights, mats of knotted roots woven beneath our feet. We stopped in front of a closed door, the wood intricately carved with a sprawling alder tree.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this, petal?” Thorne’s eyes fixed on the door, avoiding my gaze.

I took a breath. “You don’t need to worry. I’ve proven myself perfectly capable of handling fae royals in the past. I won you over, didn’t I?”

Despite my light words, my hand lingered along my bare collarbones. I didn’t have my rowan beads... I shuddered, remembering how my body had reacted when Faolan had ensorcelled me just before the coronation. Before the antidote had cured me, I’d been powerless to resist his words. I’d have done anything he’d asked me to.

But I was in the Forest Court now, not the Sky Court. The fae we were about to meet were Thorne’s family—his mother, brother, and sister.

“Trust me,” he muttered, a shadow passing over his face, “bloodthirsty heirs are nothing compared to my mother.”

I swallowed.

“Come on.” He pushed open the door.

Natural light spilled to greet us, momentarily blinding after the dim corridor. I stepped forward, squinting, not into a room, but into a large clearing in the middle of the forest.

As I blinked away the tears, I froze.

What must have been the entire Forest Court sprawled out before us. Thousands of bright eyes fixed upon us as a chorus of hissing, whispering

voices rustled between the trees.

Thorne stood rigidly at my side. This was *not* the private meeting with his mother we'd expected.

My gaze swept the clearing, taking in the wild dancing that resumed after our entrance, the elaborate costumes, the blossoms hung in lines between the trees.

Not just a meeting...a *revel*.

Silver bells rang out, chiming in the breeze, and a chorus of birds sang, the chirruped melodies joining the cacophony of fae voices. The air was thick with the scent of a sweet, heavy alcohol, like apples, almost every dancer clutching a delicate glass flute.

*Faerie wine.*

My stomach soured at the memories conjured by the cloying smell.

A gaggle of winged, green faeries fluttered over, giggling, bearing two more glasses filled to the brim, pressing one into Thorne's hand and nudging the other against mine. When I shook my head, they bit down on my fingers until I opened my clenched fist and grasped hold of the drink.

“You know when you asked if I was ready for this...” I whispered, my voice catching in my throat as I held the glass away from me, trying not to breathe in the syrupy scent.

A breeze wrapped around me, fluttering my sleeves and hair as we stepped into the celebrations, out onto soft moss that cushioned my feet as we walked. I tried to lift my chin but found myself inching closer to Thorne, not wanting to stray too far from his presence. I suddenly felt very human.

What had I expected? This might be Thorne's home, but it was still another Faerie Court.

“These are my people, petal.” Sweeping the glass from my fingers, Thorne tossed it casually back into the crowd. “No one here will harm you.”

*But they could.*

Those final words went unspoken, but I could feel it in the way my muscles quivered, ready to run, and in the taste of magic thick on my tongue. I should be safe in this Court with Thorne—even without him, I was surrounded by trees and greenery that I could enchant to protect myself.

I bunched my fists in the material of my dress as we moved through the gathered fae—whirling pixies with sharp teeth flashing against emerald-green skin, willowy Court Fae clad in dresses woven from leaves, petals, and spider silk, fae with enormous dragonfly wings shimmering in the light as they

danced through the air.

And almost as distracting as the fae dancers was the Forest Court itself. Pale, dappled light filtered down through the canopy, the tree trunks beneath as thick as any spire or turret in the Sky Court. Not just trees, I realized—buildings.

Small, glowing windows flickered from within the mammoth trunks, stairs and balconies wrapping around their circumferences. Wooden bridges hung between the trees like Winter Solstice decorations, all filled with cavorting fae bodies.

We pushed our way through the crowd, deeper into the throng. The chiming of bells and beat of drums reverberated up through my body, and I struggled to resist the itch in my feet compelling me to start dancing.

If I did, there was every chance I might be unable to stop.

I flinched at the light touch of long fingers as fae grabbed for us as we passed them, pinching at my skin and tugging at my hair. The whispers grew louder, sharp eyes lighting on me and lingering when they took in the soft curves of my body, the roundness of my face.

My stomach twisted. There was no question of how these fae saw me.

Not as a faerie queen...just a foolish human who had wandered into the middle of a revel.

The whispers suddenly grew louder, punctuated with squeals and sighs, and the crowd parted before us.

I looked up—and my breath caught at the sight of a beautiful, slender female sashaying toward us. Such ethereal beauty could only mean she was one of the Court Fae, although her eyes were completely black, like she was one of the Little Folk.

Just like Thorne, a simple, gilded circlet of leaves adorned her brow. The voices in the clearing lowered instantly as she spoke.

“Gentlefolk,” she announced, a smile curving her lips as her hands spread wide. “Your prince has returned from the Alder Trials.”

The branches around us shook as the clearing filled with wild screams like ringing bells. Shining Little Folk darted through the air like dragonflies, the silvery sound of high laughter lingering in their wake.

Thorne leaned forward, speaking in a low, throaty voice. “This is not the private audience you implied, Mother.”

*Mother.*

*This was the queen of the Forest Court.*

I studied her in a new light, searching for Thorne's features. I took in her raven hair, braided in an intricate design above her head, the floating gossamer layers of her gown. There was something about her long, slender limbs that put me in mind of a weeping willow.

She shared the same graceful movements as her son, the same high cheekbones and soft, full lips. She looked no older than thirty...but, of course, I knew that was deceiving. It had been the same with her husband, Silvius, the Alder King.

"I thought we would speak alone first," Thorne continued, still in a low, even voice. "Just family."

The queen made no effort to lower her voice. "How could I keep my Court from their winning champion? They are all clamoring to hear the announcement. This way, they won't hear it on the wings of Little Folk gossiping."

*They don't know the outcome of the Alder Trials.*

My stomach dropped. Of course, the coronation had only happened this morning, but I'd thought the Forest Court would already know who'd won...

Thorne cleared his throat but didn't answer.

"And I see you brought back a little trophy," she cooed, her black eyes snapping to me. "Whenever did you find time to pick up such a delicate little thing, Thorne? Is she an enchantress?"

I stiffened, heat rushing to my cheeks.

The queen continued in a silvery voice, "Yoren can introduce you to the others, little enchantress." She gestured along the pathway the fae had cleared behind her to where a dais rose up above the crowd at the edge of the clearing.

Two dark-haired fae who were unmistakably Thorne's siblings—a handsome male with long, black hair and an open, heart-shaped face, and a young, brunette female—watched us with curiosity.

To their right stood a human, who I assumed must be Yoren. He was a head shorter than the fae, his hair graying at the temples like a badger's snout, his beard clipped close to his chin. His eyes locked on to mine, sharp and bright as a fox's.

My mouth grew dry. Of course the queen hadn't assumed I was here as Thorne's partner—none of the fae would.

I was human.

Beside me, Thorne fixed a smile on his face, the faint shadows licking

from his shoulders the only sign of his irritation. “Allow me to introduce Aster Wilden, Mother.” He turned to me, extending a hand in a gesture for me to step closer. “Not just any enchantress, but the one who freed me from Yvette’s curse.”

The smile on the queen’s face dimmed a little.

“There’s plenty more to say about Aster, but it’s for the whole Court to hear...since you ignored my wishes for a private conversation. Aster, this is my mother, Queen Calla of the Forest Court.”

Without waiting for a response, Thorne spun on his heel and stalked along the pathway to the dais.

I gulped. There was something about his wild, crackling energy that reminded me of our time in the Cursed Court, when he’d been so explosively unpredictable. Perhaps his family brought that out in him.

Shooting the queen a weak smile, I trailed after him, picking up my step in order to catch up with his long strides.

The whispers of the forest fae died down to silence, an uneasy tension palpable in the air as I swept between the lines of fae.

I faltered as I reached the steps up to the dais. This was it. Once I got up there, I would be announcing my claim to not just Thorne’s family, but to *all* of his Court...and hoping they believed in their prince enough to back me.

“Aster?” Thorne looked down at me with an expression of total confidence. “Won’t you join me?”

Strength flooded through me, and I climbed the steps to the dais.

My stomach bottomed out again as I took in the sheer number of forest fae gathered before us, their revel interrupted.

From up here, I could see the golden platters heaped with fruit, the huge jugs filled with more of the faerie wine the Little Folk had pressed upon me.

Queen Calla ascended the steps slowly after us, her eyes narrowed at Thorne as she moved to stand beside him.

Thorne stepped forward. “Greetings, gentlefolk. No doubt you are excited to hear what happened at the Alder Trials.” He raised his voice only slightly, but it carried. “I believe the true heir to the throne stands before you now.”

Tentative cheers rose again, and goosebumps prickled along my skin. Thorne turned to me, and I stepped forward.

The cheers died out as quickly as they had risen, the energy and magic that hung thick in the air suddenly shifting, like the charge before a storm.

Thorne gave a dangerous smile. “Aster was entered as the Sky Court’s

nominated champion. She won the final Trial using her enchanting magic. And she killed..." Thorne paused. "She killed the Alder King before Faolan could and staked her claim for the Alder Crown."

Murmurs swelled through the air, and my palms grew damp.

"What are you saying?" Queen Calla hissed, lowering her voice and gripping Thorne's sleeve. "If this human was entered as Faolan's champion and won on his behalf, then by law *he* is the rightful king. You failed us, Thorne."

A vein pulsed in my throat.

Thorne didn't falter. "Aster killed the Alder King," he insisted. "She has a claim."

"She's *human*," the queen repeated in a hard, cold voice. "She can't become queen."

I took a trembling step forward. "Faolan is not the only one who can exploit loopholes in fae wording." My voice wavered, sounding dull next to Thorne's, as all human voices did compared to the rich timbre of the fae. "The Alder Trial rules say the *winning champion* becomes the Alder Heir. I was representing Faolan, but I still won. And I killed the Alder King before he could, which makes me the rightful owner of the Alder Crown."

I said that last part with certainty. Fae couldn't lie, but as a human, I could state it like a fact.

The crowd stilled, silent.

"Faolan betrayed me. He betrayed all of us," Thorne continued, addressing everyone. "He may have been a ward here, but he never wanted the Forest Court to take the crown." His voice was strained. "Year after year, he schemed to extend my curse. He entered Aster as his champion to try to cheat at the Trials. And he revealed the existence of the enchanters to his Court."

"In that case, Thorne," the queen's voice cut across the resounding silence, "where is the Alder Crown?"

I exchanged a look with Thorne, my mouth dry.

*This is not going well.*

If we couldn't win over Thorne's own Court, what chance did we have of convincing the rest of Faerie of my claim?

I reached out for his hand, his fingers hot against mine as I interlaced them, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze.

Thorne gasped and staggered back.

My hand tightened around his, worry knotting in my chest. “What’s wrong?”

The color drained from his face, leaving him paler than I’d ever seen him, his skin like moonlight, dark hair stark in comparison.

The queen shoved me aside, pulling Thorne away from me, holding his head between her slender hands. He looked...not quite here, his eyes half-lidded, his gaze slightly unfocused.

Had he drunk some of the faerie wine the Little Folk had pressed upon us to steady his nerves? Was he sick?

The queen’s face was caught somewhere between shock and outrage, her nostrils flaring as if she’d smelled something unpleasant.

Her eyes glittered as she stared between us. “I don’t believe it,” she hissed.

Thorne pulled away from the queen toward me but stumbled, the usual gracefulness of his movements gone.

“Thorne...” I reached out for him again.

He stared at me as if he’d never seen me before, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his pupils wide. My mind flashed back to Silvius’s last moments as he made his speech while poison spread through his body.

Had Thorne been poisoned?

A cold sweat crept between my shoulder blades. Whatever it was, I could cure him. I just had to figure out what was wrong. I stepped toward him, my hand reaching for his brow. “Thorne, tell me what’s—”

“Ferne, get him away, now,” the queen demanded. “Inside. Away from her.”

*Away from me?*

I gripped his arm. “No, I’m staying with him. I can help.”

The raven-haired fae who I’d assumed was Thorne’s brother darted forward, an amused smile on his lips as he stared between Thorne and me. He easily prised my fingers from Thorne, then wrapped his brother’s arm around his shoulder.

“Enchanted to meet you, Aster Wilden,” he purred.

The queen glared at him before clapping her hands together and turning back to the crowd. “I’m afraid we must cut today’s celebrations short. After these...revelations, my son and I have much to discuss.”

I spun around to face the revelers—and then back again as Ferne hauled Thorne toward a slim door into one of the tree trunks behind us, supporting

him as if they were finishing a heavy night at the tavern.

“No, wait.” I ran after them. “If he’s sick, I can help. I’m a greenwitch. A healer.”

My protests fell on deaf ears. The queen sailed out after them, sweeping up the other dark-haired sibling and the enchanter, Yoren, as she went.

Two guards loomed before me, long spears with leaf-shaped blades shining wickedly in their hands as they barred me from following.

What had happened to Thorne? To my eye, he looked like he was suffering from a sudden fever. But other than whisking him inside and away from me, his family hadn’t seemed concerned for his welfare at all. His brother had been grinning as if he found the whole thing amusing.

I took a step back, the magic of the crowd behind me prickling up my spine. Silver bells, did Queen Calla intend for me just to remain out here in the revel?

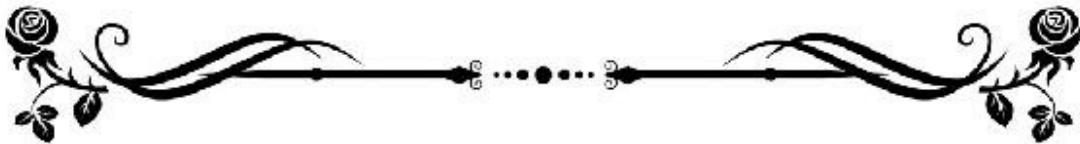
“You will take me to Thorne.” My voice shook even though I tried to sound demanding, addressing the guards.

One of them turned their shining black eyes on me, head tilted to one side like a hedgerow bird eyeing up a worm. “We listen to a fae queen, little enchantress, not a human one.”

My whole body shook, my pulse beating loudly in my ears.

So much for my first appearance as the Queen of Faerie... And what had happened to Thorne?

## CHAPTER THREE



EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, I loitered outside the doors to the royal court.

I'd been escorted to a windowless but luxurious bedroom last night, several armed guards outside keeping me from leaving—or perhaps preventing unwanted fae guests from entering.

I'd thought my worry for Thorne would keep me up all night, but exhaustion must have crept over me, as I'd jolted awake, panicked, with no idea how much time had passed. I'd peered through the keyhole to find the guards outside gone, and so I'd made quick work of opening the lock with an enchantment—the benefit of a door made from living wood...

I had crept out, searching the unfamiliar Court for signs of Thorne or the royal family. Now I stood before two different guards who flanked the entrance to the main court, ignoring my presence.

I'd given up asking to see Thorne, tiring of brusque replies that the forest prince was with his family and was not to be disturbed.

I glared up at the doors, hands braced on my hips. The doors were elaborate, studded with circular patterns of green acorns in varying sizes.

Right now, I hated them.

Suddenly, they swung inward. I craned my neck forward, trying to get a look inside. An official-looking fae stepped out, dark-green robes pinned at the shoulders with gold clasps shaped like alder cones.

“Thorne!” I yelled before the guards pulled the doors closed with a dull *thunk*. I cursed under my breath.

I deliberated a moment before following the green-robed fae across the courtyard. Perhaps I would have more luck with her than those stony guards.

“Is Thorne inside?” I called out as I hurried to keep up.

“Yes.”

“And he’s well?”

She kept walking ahead with a fluid grace that infuriated me. “Prince Thorne is in perfect health.”

“Does he know I’m outside? That they’re not letting me in?”

She paused, turning to look back over her shoulder. “He is aware.”

I swallowed back the hurt as she glided away, a sinking feeling dragging through me.

The fae couldn’t lie...but still, I felt uneasy. *Something* had happened to Thorne yesterday—and it must have been something bad for him to abandon me partway through our explanation to his Court about all that had happened in the Alder Trials.

If he really was well, then why hadn’t he come to see me?

I ground my teeth. Perhaps he had decided to petition his family on my behalf—but if he had to fight my battles for me, it seemed even less likely we’d be able to persuade the fae to see me as a queen and not a *little enchantress*.

Whatever he was doing, why not shadow out to tell me?

I paced the circular courtyard for the hundredth time. Set back into alcoves, carved wooden statues depicted regal fae, each swathed in ivy and blossoming vines that grew through every crack in the flagstones and covered the walls in a lattice of flowers.

My fingertips throbbed with the desire to enchant something again. I’d already broken through one door—why not these?

It would be easy. There were plants everywhere—the tree building we were in, the acorn-studded door, the foliage lacing the walls and floor.

I could force my way in. *Prove* to Queen Calla and her Court that I was powerful, despite being human.

I dropped my head, fiddling with the lacing of my dress. Even if it hadn’t been the reception I’d hoped for, the Forest Court was still my best chance of securing support among the fae.

The door opened once more. The bearded man from yesterday—Yoren—stepped into the courtyard. A luxurious, embroidered tunic in a dark purple clung to his petite body, long, draping sleeves swishing at his sides. A large, golden pin in the shape of a circle split in two and topped with a crown sparkled at his breast.

It wasn’t a fae outfit, but it wasn’t a style I’d ever seen in Rosehill, either.

As he walked toward the opposite side of the courtyard, his astute gaze roved over me, his expression neither warm nor dismissive.

I made the split-second decision to leave my vigil by the doors and follow after him.

“Wait!”

“Greetings, Aster Wilden.” Yoren greeted me without pausing, his human voice smoothed with a gentle accent I couldn’t place. Perhaps it came from years of living with the fae. “You have been the topic of much discussion this morning.”

After my reception yesterday, that hardly came as a surprise.

“And Thorne?”

“Is part of these fae discussions also.”

*Fae discussions.* No wonder I was being kept in the dark.

I fell into step with him. “Do you know if they back my claim?”

“It is not my place to speculate what the royal family will or will not do.”

I took a deep, steady breath. “Then what is your place?” I added hopefully, “The queen suggested I speak to you yesterday, after all.”

He shot me another shrewd look. “I lead the Enchanters’ Guild here in the Forest Court.”

There was a *guild* for the enchanters? My heart sped as I continued to follow him.

Resolve straightened my spine. I’d had little luck finding fae allies in this Court so far or even being included in discussions. But if there were humans here—a whole guild of enchanters—perhaps I’d do a better job of finding friends there.

And Yoren was their leader...

I shifted to a more polite tone. “May I speak with the other enchanters? Perhaps you could gather them in one place so I could address them?”

“They were all watching yesterday.”

*Oh.*

So they’d already seen me fail to convince the Forest Court I was the legitimate heir to the fae throne.

“I’d like to explain what I can do for them—what I’m hoping to do for humans across Faerie.”

Yoren didn’t break pace. “We know everything we need to know about you, Aster Wilden,” he said coolly. “You’re a greenwitch. Powerful enough to kill my predecessor, Yvette, despite having no training. You entered the

Alder Trials and won. You killed King Silvius and wish to claim the crown despite the fact it sits on another's head." He gave me a brittle smile. "And it's the Alder Crown you'll need, believe me. Without it, the fae will never accept you as their queen, no matter what you've done to earn it."

"And do the enchanters require a crown as well as the fae?"

His lips lifted, although he still didn't turn to look at me. "We do not require a crown. What we require is *discretion*. Which you have clearly demonstrated you lack."

My lips parted, heat prickling up my neck and across my cheeks.

The look Yoren shot me this time was cold. "We heard how you used your enchantments to win the Alder Trials. You revealed the secret of the enchanters to the entire Kingdom of Faerie, unless I'm very much mistaken."

We broke out from the corridor and into the forest proper, the silvery morning light making us both squint. Our breath should have clouded the air at this time of year, but the magic of the forest gave no signs it was winter. Birdsong rang out like a spring dawn chorus, glossy leaves lined branches that should have been bare, and huge, green ferns curled through the air like the wings of a dragon.

I finally found my voice. "I did what I had to. Faolan had already revealed our secret to his Court. It would have gotten out anyway. He hates humans, especially enchanters. You have no idea, Yoren. When I was in the Sky Court—what the other Courts do to the Tithe servants—"

"Will be *nothing* compared to what they do to enchanters," he cut across me. "If you think it's bad how the fae treat humans for idle pleasure, how do you think they'll treat those they see as a threat? Your actions have put every enchanter in Faerie at risk. So you might want to rethink your request to meet the other enchanters, young greenwitch."

He quickened his pace, rushing us past small faeries sitting on toadstools like chairs. They paused their conversation as we passed, their beady black eyes trained on me.

The heavy beat in my chest grew louder. It hadn't occurred to me that the other enchanters might not welcome me after what I'd done at the Alder Trials. But I'd had no choice. Faolan had made it so that I had to use an enchantment to defeat the wyrm.

And I couldn't regret winning or freeing the Tithe servants at the Sky Court. I was right to want to free Tithe humans everywhere.

I drew a breath, steeling myself. I had to try to convince them. That was

why we'd come here—to win allies.

"Please. I'd like to explain myself. To tell them my plans—what I can do for them—Tithe servants *and* enchanters. I will make sure that no human ever suffers at the hands of the fae again."

Yoren let out a low chuckle. "For a greenwitch, you are a dreamer."

I stiffened. That was one thing I'd never been accused of before. "This isn't just a dream, Yoren. When I'm Queen of Faerie, the enchanters will be free. They can live anywhere they like, sell their Craft to any fae or Court."

"I didn't say it wasn't a very nice dream."

His words were a slap.

Frustration simmered in my chest. The urge to enchant, to *make* Yoren listen, tingled in my fingertips, just as it had done when I'd considered forcing my way in to see Queen Calla. This place was ripe with magic, and I'd never felt more powerful. Ancient trees towered above us, plants tangling around my ankles in their shadows.

"Please," I said again. "Let me speak to the others. At least let me try."

A long silence followed, disturbed only by the sound of Yoren's robes swishing through the undergrowth.

He cut me a cool, assessing look. "I can't be seen to be supporting you."

Relief barrelled through me. "You don't have to support me," I said quickly. "You just have to let me speak."

After another agonizing pause, he gave a tight nod.

A spider-like feeling skittered over my skin as he stopped in front of me and brushed my hair back from my shoulders, his cool hands grazing the back of my neck.

I glanced down at the string of orange rowan berries now resting against my collarbones.

"In the meantime, you shouldn't be wandering Court without these," he said in a clipped voice. "It isn't safe."



We entered a grove of ancient weeping willow trees, and Yoren parted their branches like curtains, gesturing for me to step through. My eyes adjusted quickly to the greenish shade. Next to the tree trunk stood a stone arch, the brick slightly crumbled.

The visual immediately reminded me of the arch into the enchanted rose garden at the Cursed Court.

My eyes landed on the keystone at the top, engraved with the same bisected circle topped with a crown that was pinned to Yoren's robes.

"The symbol of the enchanters," he explained. "This was made by one of our mason enchanters when the Guild was founded. Only humans may pass through."

*A mason enchanter.* I'd never really stopped to think of the different types of enchanters, but I supposed there must be as many as there were different types of human Craft. "Do the fae know about this place?"

"Our patrons know where we work. But they respect our privacy."

We passed beneath the arch, where stone steps descended into the earth.

Yoren paused at the summit, cutting me a swift glance. "You're sure about this?"

I resisted the urge to glare at him. All of his caution was making me nervous. "Yes."

He started down the stairs, his cloak sweeping behind him, and I glanced around before following him. As I stepped through the arch, something invisible trailed over my skin, making me shiver.

A moment later, human voices echoed all around, and I was enveloped in a warm smell that reminded me of Rosehill. I breathed in the scent of linen and baking and tobacco.

We walked through several stone tunnels lit by lanterns before emerging into a bright, vast hall filled with people. I blinked as my eyes adjusted. The huge room had two levels, the second an open gallery above us. Paintings lined the lower walls, a fire crackled in a hearth, and sunlight filtered in through the top windows, illuminating the empty armchairs, bookcases, and rugs filling the space. In one corner, a harp played all by itself.

My gaze darted around as I tried to soak it all in. I'd never seen so much human Craft in one place.

"This is the common room," Yoren murmured under his breath, "but each Craft has a dedicated workshop with all the tools needed." He indicated the rooms shooting off from this one.

I peered into the closest one. The smell of oil paints hung heavy in the air, and several easels sat expectantly, bearing blank canvases.

Then I startled back as a pair of cold, narrowed eyes glared back at me.

A short, slender figure rose from a stool and took a few steps toward me.

Instinctively, I stepped back—before a curtain was swept across a rail in front of me, blocking my view of the chambers beyond.

I swallowed. Maybe Yoren had been right...but I had to try. And maybe the other enchanters would be less mistrustful once they'd heard my explanations.

I turned back to face the common room. Enchanters hurried past carrying pots, boxes, bundles of parchments, canvases, and rolls of materials. Each one slowed to shoot me an icy glare as they passed.

“They’re busy,” I observed, fiddling with the end of my sleeve. “Are the fae so demanding?”

Yoren gave a tight-lipped smile, staring around the room and not at me. “They’re not working. They’re packing.”

I frowned. “Packing?”

“It’s no longer safe for us to gather in one place like this. Faolan knows we’re in the Forest Court, and now, thanks to you, the other Courts will know, too. Our best hope of survival is to disperse. Some will return to their human settlements...” Two humans heaved a shining suit of armor past us. “Others will seek fae patrons elsewhere.”

“They’ll go to the other fae Courts? But isn’t that dangerous?”

“Very,” Yoren agreed, “but many of us are already too entwined with fae life...quite literally...to do otherwise. Living in the fae Courts preserves our youth and health. If we left, we would quickly age and fade away.”

I remembered how young the enchantress Yvette had looked.

“How old are you?” I asked.

A soft chuckle. “About a hundred years older than I look.”

“And how—”

I leaped back with a yelp as a huge spinning wheel clattered toward us, rumbling over the stone floor of the common room. I felt the whisk of air as the heavy wooden wheel skimmed past, just narrowly missing me even after I’d moved out of the way.

*Any closer and that would have really hurt...*

I twisted to face the direction it had come from, heart hammering. Two sour-faced enchanters wearing soft woolen robes, with gold pins that matched Yoren’s at their breasts, stared down at me from the top of a small staircase. One tapped a long spindle against her palm.

My gaze traveled slowly back to the wheel lying on its side on the floor. Then I looked up to take in the rest of the common room.

Everyone had gone quiet, pausing their frenetic packing to stare at me with barely concealed hostility.

A thick, furious tension simmered in the air.

I couldn't taste the magic here like I could around the fae...but I had no doubt that it was brewing.

“Greetings, en-enchanters,” I stammered out, then stopped and took a deep breath. I needed to speak to them like a queen. “I’m Aster. I know some of you heard me address the Forest Court yesterday—”

A flock of birds erupted from another room. I had a split second to take it in before they descended on me.

I flung my arms up with a cry, shielding the exposed skin on my face, my neck. The room disappeared into a cloud of fluttering white wings and sharp beaks, the tweets and chatter a rich shriek in my ears.

A peck to the back of one hand sent a trickle of warm blood running down my wrist.

Hard fingers wrapped firmly around my arm, dragging me back, out of the common room and into the stone tunnels leading back to the forest.

I stumbled, moving as quickly as I could, allowing Yoren to guide me out. Wings beat at our backs, the sharp prick of tiny beaks thudding into me even through my dress.

The birds only retreated when we emerged back into the forest, gasping for breath.

I froze, trembling, waiting for my breath to return to normal.

“There are certain enchanters who have an affinity for animals,” Yoren explained, once the noise from the birds had faded from hearing.

I swallowed hard. I’d hoped that I might find some allies among the enchanters once they’d heard what I had to tell them about the Tithe humans, about my vision for humans to rule alongside the fae.

But they hadn’t even waited for me to explain.

And they’d had no hesitation in attacking me outright, making it very clear I wasn’t welcome in the Guild.

Even the fae hadn’t done that...

I sank back against the arch, the rough, cold stone digging into my back.

“I did try to warn you,” Yoren said in a silky voice.

I wrapped my arms around myself. “They wouldn’t even listen to me...”

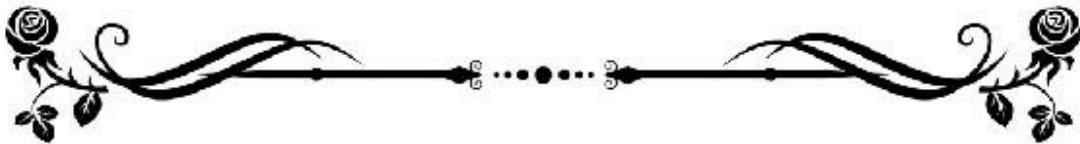
Yoren turned back to me, his gaze shrewd. “This will mark a new era for enchanters, Aster, no matter the outcome of your fight for the Alder Crown.

And that's because of *your* actions in the Trials. That's not something you can undo with a few pretty sentences."

I closed my eyes. "What should I do?"

"Go back to the Forest royals, Aster Wilden. You won't convince anyone you're queen without the crown, but having Prince Thorne at your side means something. If I'm honest..." He lowered his voice. "You'll be safer with the fae."

## CHAPTER FOUR



I SAT with my back straight, hands pressed to my knees. From the couch opposite, Queen Calla watched me, her black eyes gleaming. Next to her, Thorne's sister, who had been formally introduced as Ivye, lounged back in her seat, one knee pulled up to her chest as she twirled a strand of long, brown hair around her finger and sipped from her teacup. Her violet-blue gown clung to her body, the material shimmering like petals studded with morning dew.

Outside, rain pattered against leaves, the sound a soft roar through the glassless windows of the parlor.

I cleared my throat. "Will Thorne be joining us today?"

It had been days since I'd seen him now.

"Thorne is currently with his brother, Ferne," the queen replied.

*And that doesn't answer my question at all.*

Still, it was only the second thing she'd said to me, after inquiring about my health when I'd first arrived. That had to count as progress.

I shifted uncomfortably on the plush couch, which was the deep emerald green of moss. Queen Calla had spent the rest of our time today staring directly at me, as though her black eyes could see something others could not, a faint frown creasing her otherwise perfect forehead. When my demands to be taken to the royal family had finally been accepted, I'd not expected this.

Sitting here reminded me of the few afternoon teas I'd endured with Lady Cicely and my half-sister Ava, where silences stretched long between awkward chit-chat, shadowed by all of the more serious topics left unsaid.

Making small talk was not a necessary skill for a greenwitch...and it was one I was particularly hopeless at.

The wall clock ticked loudly, a human sound in an otherwise very fae room. The air was perfumed with sweet honeysuckle and clematis that grew along the walls in a neat pattern of pink and white, like a living floral wallpaper.

“It’s raining,” I observed.

Silver bells, was I really resorting to talking about the weather?

“Yes,” the queen replied after a moment’s pause. “It is.”

Silence fell again, and this time I let it. If all the forest queen wanted was to sit and stare at me, I supposed I could let her. It beat being banished from the royal quarters altogether.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to relax, to loosen my shoulders.

The room was reminiscent of a human parlor. Wide windows opened up to the forest beyond, while pinecones studded the ceiling above us in intricate patterns. A rich, dark wood grew up to form the furniture around us, and lacy fern cloths covered the tables.

“I’m sorry about Silvius,” I said in a quiet voice.

The queen and her daughter exchanged a glance.

“I know you can never forgive me for what I did—”

“Lady Wilden, please.” I started at the unfamiliar title. “There is nothing to forgive. When Silvius left for the Trials, we all knew what awaited him. We knew he would not be returning to us, one way or another.” Queen Calla’s words were sharp. “And the death you gave him... It was kinder than the death he would have gotten elsewhere.”

I thought of Faolan’s bloody sword, of how he’d cut off the king’s head after he’d already died.

The queen cleared her throat. “Will you have tea?”

I nodded, the churning in my stomach settling a little. “Please.”

Two brownies leaped forward, squabbling over who would pour. The one closest to me won the teapot, while the second grabbed my cup in triumph.

“What tea would Lady Wilden like?” the one wielding the teapot squeaked.

“Whatever you have there will be fine, thank you,” I replied, my voice softening and a tightness building in my chest.

The two brownies with their big, owlish eyes and bark-like skin reminded me of Mosswhistle.

I had no idea where my loyal friend was right now. Hopefully it was headed for the Forest Court with the other escaped servants...

“Teapot is enchanted, Lady Human,” the brownie explained. “Pours any tea you like.”

*Lady Human?* That was a new one...

I glanced again at the teapot, which looked just like a normal ceramic teapot to me. “Mint, then, please.”

After several whispered threats to one another, the two brownies managed to pour my tea without spilling a drop. They set it on the low table, bowing to both me and the queen as they backed away.

Steam curled into the air as I picked it up and paused. The fine hairs on the back of my neck rose, sensing—

The door opened to reveal two fae males.

*Finally.*

“Thorne—Ferne!” Ivye exclaimed. Thorne stepped through first, his eyes finding mine immediately. He was dressed all in black, his shirt unlaced and tight at his shoulders, the cuffs embroidered with dark green leaves. A slight flush colored his sharp cheekbones.

I lurched to my feet, knocking into the low table between the couches, rattling the porcelain saucers as I set my own cup down.

Emotions flooded through me.

Relief that Thorne was truly well. Annoyance that he hadn’t come to see me sooner. And lastly, a rush of desire as he stalked toward me, an intense glitter in his hazel eyes.

My stomach lurched with disappointment as he drew to an abrupt halt several steps away.

“Where have you—” I began.

“Thorne,” Queen Calla said crisply. “I thought we agreed it was for the best if you remained in your own quarters for a while longer.”

A lick of irritation curled through my chest. “Where have you *been*?” I demanded again, crossing my arms. “What have you been doing? Why didn’t you come and find me?”

Thorne dragged his gaze from me to the forest queen. “My mother felt it was best if I spent some time alone, after...what happened when we addressed the Court.”

“And what *did* happen, exactly? One moment you were fine, the next...it was like you were drunk on faerie wine.”

Ivye laughed wickedly, flashing her canines. “He did look drunk, didn’t he?”

“Completely wilted,” Ferne agreed from where he lounged against the doorway, accepting a teacup from one of the brownies, who had clambered on top of the other to present it to him.

He swept into an exaggerated bow. “Your Majesties...”

My cheeks flushed as his twinkling gaze flicked between Queen Calla and me. The fae queen let out a slight hiss between her teeth.

While he and Thorne were undeniably siblings, Ferne was slighter than his older brother, his chin more pointed. But clearly, he was just as reckless.

“I wanted to find you sooner, but my family insisted I take some time to recover.” Thorne shot his mother a dark look.

“Recover from what?”

“What happened at the revel.”

“Which *was*?” I pressed.

“I became...overwhelmed.”

“Overwhelmed?” I repeated in disbelief.

I’d seen Thorne challenge Faolan in a room filled with fae royals. I’d seen him prepared to leap into the serrated jaws of a wyrm. I’d seen him transformed into a literal beast and still manage to leash his nature to stand at my side and defend me.

I found it hard to believe addressing his home Court would bring this particular fae prince to a faint.

And yet he couldn’t lie...

Still, there was more to this than a simple case of being *overwhelmed*.

The queen got to her feet, taking a couple of steps toward her son. “Last time we spoke, you *agreed* with me that it was best that you spent some time alone.”

He flashed her an easy smile. “And now I have spent some time alone.”

“And you’re just—you’re fine now?” I interrupted. “You won’t suddenly keel over again?” The words came out more sharply than I’d intended. I’d been worried about him and furious that I’d been kept from his side. For six whole days.

“I won’t,” he promised with a smile.

“Thorne is one of the strongest fae in the whole of Faerie,” Ivye trilled.

“Not to forget one of the most brooding,” Ferne added, raising his brows playfully when his brother glared at him.

I took a sip of my tea for the first time. Whatever had happened to Thorne, he *seemed* fine now....

“It’s a pleasure to meet you properly, Aster.” Ferne raised his teacup to me with a grin. “I should thank you for breaking my brother’s curse. If you hadn’t freed him, I’d have had to enter the Alder Trials in his place, and I’d almost certainly have been killed in the first round.”

“No, you would not,” Queen Calla chided. “You are a prince of the Forest Court.” Her eyes narrowed. “Although apparently you are unable to follow simple instructions, like keeping your brother entertained—”

“No, he probably would have been killed, Mother.” Ivye’s eyes glittered. “Ferne is very good at talking, but not much else, unfortunately.”

“Sister, you wound me with your iron words.” Ferne pressed his hand over his heart. “I’m a lover not a fighter.” He shot me a conspiratorial wink, eliciting a disapproving growl from Thorne, who was leaning with his arms braced on the backrest of the couch.

I drained my tea. “I’m also glad you didn’t have to enter the Alder Trials.” I stifled a smile. “And even more pleased you’re not very good at following instructions.”

I set the teacup back down, and a brownie instantly appeared at my elbow, topping it up.

“Thorne told us that you slew an earthwurm,” Ivye said. “And that you made an antidote to ensorcelling. Even Yvette couldn’t do that.”

My cheeks warmed.

“Yes, it seems Thorne has brought home quite the enchantress, Lady Wilden,” the queen said coolly. With her night-black eyes, it was hard to read her facial expressions—to know if the slight smile on her lips was forced. “One he can’t seem to stay away from.”

“Which reminds me,” Thorne interrupted. “I’ve come to show you around.”

“What?” The queen jerked her head toward Thorne.

He walked around the couch, and for a moment, he looked as if he would offer me his hand to pull me up to standing before thinking better of it. “I assume no one thought to offer Aster a tour. I’d like her to see the rest of the Forest Court while she’s here.”

“Yoren can take her, then,” Calla snapped.

Ivye slid off her seat beside the queen and flounced over to perch on the armrest of mine. Draping one elbow along the backrest, she planted her bare feet next to me. “It might not seem like it, but we’re all happy that Thorne’s happy. Even though you’re a human.” She took my hand, her grip

surprisingly strong, before addressing her brother. “Perhaps it’s better if *I* show Aster around, Thorne. I’ll show her all the best parts—”

Thorne gripped his sister’s elbow and dragged her back to her feet. “Aster doesn’t share your taste for danger, Ivye. She has no interest in seeing the copse of flesh-eating birchwood or the lightning walk around the treetops.”

Ivye shot a brief glance at her mother, then scoffed. “Aster survived the Alder Trials. I think she can handle a little excitement. We have so much more than just trees here, which is all *you’ll* show her. *I’ll* take her to the caves behind the waterfalls after we visit the river kelpies.”

I blanched, remembering the lake at the Cursed Court. I had no desire to come face-to-face with a kelpie again anytime soon.

Thorne met her gaze with a firm look of his own. “Aster was almost eaten by a kelpie at the Cursed Court.”

“One that you apparently kept as a *pet*,” I muttered.

He cut a glance back my way, his lips slowly curving up. “I have since reconsidered the practicalities of keeping murderous water fae as pets...”

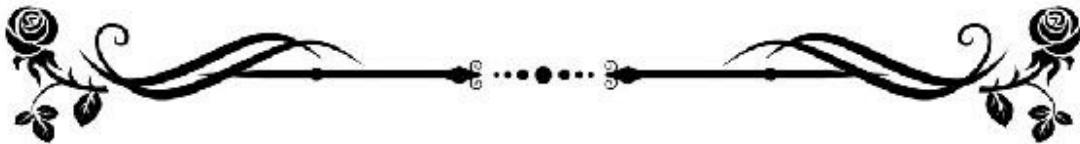
I looked around the parlor, at Queen Calla’s frozen expression, the smirk stamped across Ferne’s face, Ivye’s look of resignation.

I ought to stay. To make an effort to win around the rest of Thorne’s family so that they might be a little friendlier to me while we stayed here—or even that they might at last back my claim to the Alder Crown.

But so far, my efforts with the Forest Court had yielded few results. And I’d been apart from Thorne for days now. I wanted some time alone with him. He still owed me an explanation, and maybe he’d open up once we were on our own.

“I’d love to see the rest of the Forest Court with you.” Getting to my feet, I smoothed down the front of my skirts, then dipped into a curtsey in the vague direction of the queen. “Thank you very much for the tea.”

## CHAPTER FIVE



MY LEGS BURNED as I followed Thorne up a steep forest path, trees and leaves brushing my arms. A quiet afternoon light filtered through the trees, the air filled with the distant sound of birdsong and the occasional hum of wings.

The Forest Court was beautiful.

We'd spent days exploring its wonders while Thorne recovered from whatever it was that had happened to him. So far, we'd visited an ancient grove of yew trees whose gnarled roots had once been used as cages for enemies of the Court, beautiful glades with velvet-soft grasses and crystal-clear lakes, and swaying wooden bridges hanging between the towering tree buildings.

Thorne brushed aside a huge fern and held it up for me to step through onto a rocky ledge beyond.

"The best view in the whole of the Forest Court." Thorne's voice was a low rumble, barely audible over the thundering rush of water from the nearby waterfalls.

The hairs prickled across the nape of my neck.

Through the rainbow-laced mist rising from the tumbling falls, the entire Forest Court lay before us, the tree buildings rising like proud spires, the dappled light painting everything in golds and greens and browns.

I turned to catch Thorne's eye to find him already looking at me, but from a few paces away, his hands clasped in front of him.

He looked in perfect health again, although I noticed he'd kept his distance physically, never touching me and sleeping in a separate room at night. Much to my annoyance and despite my persistent questioning, he had

told me nothing more about his mysterious illness at the revel and sudden recovery.

Not only had he been silent on *that* topic, but he'd been hesitant to discuss more serious matters...like exactly how we were going to challenge Faolan when it looked like none of the fae would ever accept me as queen.

"When I spoke to Yoren the other week," I said suddenly, my voice catching in my throat. "He said that the fae will never accept me as queen without the Alder Crown. Is that what your family thinks?"

Thorne exhaled slowly, his gaze moving from me to the sparkling water dropping away from us.

Putting off answering, I realized. Because he couldn't lie.

"Thorne," I prompted in my firmest voice. "I need to know."

He huffed a breath. "I had hoped...that I might convince my own people. My own *family*. But..." He raked a hand through his dark hair. "It's proving harder than I thought."

"And?" I demanded.

"And I think without the crown, we're stuck," he admitted.

"So...we need to get it back from Faolan."

Thorne didn't respond again, gazing thoughtfully out at the Forest Court.

"Thorne?" My fingers clenched into fists at my side. We'd agreed not to keep things from one another.

"It's like I told you when we first left the Sky Court, Aster," he said slowly. "It's too risky for us to challenge Faolan outright when we still don't know whether the Alder Crown is working for him. If he can use it, he can compel me to do anything—to hurt you. And none of the other fae will help for just the same reason. If the crown answers to Faolan, he can compel any one of us."

I fought down the protests on my lips. I knew that Thorne was right...but if the only way to challenge Faolan was to take back the crown...

"Not to mention," Thorne added, "we still don't know if you'll be able to use the crown. Whether it will answer to a human master."

"Okay, so how do we get around that? I can't just hide away in the Forest Court—that helps no one. I won't do nothing."

Catching the mutinous look on my face, he softened his voice. "I already have a spy in the Sky Court. They'll be returning any day now, and then we can find out whether Faolan is actually using the crown. If the crown isn't working for him, that solves one of our problems, at least."

Excitement that there was a plan in place, a reason we were waiting around the Forest Court, tussled with indignation that Thorne hadn't mentioned this to me until now.

"You could have told me that before," I said mulishly. I flicked my hair back behind my shoulders, sinking down onto a soft, moss-covered rock. "And I think it's about time you explained what happened at the revel. You say you're fine, but you're acting differently..."

It was true that Thorne was showing no signs of illness. His collapse, the fever, the vacant look in his eyes...it had all gone. He looked just as healthy and virile as ever, his eyes bright when I caught him looking at me.

But that was just it. He always seemed to be watching me, attentive, but at a slight distance. And with a new, contained manner that confused me.

"Why are you standing all the way over there like a courting lord?" I asked him, patting the rock beside me. "You can't avoid the topic forever."

This elicited a low huff...although he still didn't move any closer.

"Thorne," I said softly. "What happened? I know it's your first time back here, with your family and your Court, since I broke Yvette's curse. You were away for a hundred years—not a long time in the grand scheme of fae history, but enough time to make you feel like a stranger. So I know it must be...overwhelming." I used the same word he had before. "Not to mention you've brought a human back here as your betrothed, which your family doesn't exactly seem thrilled about. But still...I'm a greenwitch. And I know something happened to you at the revel. You owe me an explanation."

"Aster... I'm fine." Thorne's voice was slightly strained. He took a step forward, then stopped himself. "Choosing you was the easiest decision I ever made. The rest of my family will get used to it."

Our eyes met. Heat shivered through me as his forest-dappled gaze burned into mine. I stood slowly.

"If you're fine, then why are you avoiding touching me?"

"I told you, I'm fine."

I stepped closer to him, and held out both hands. "Then touch me."

He took a bold, swaggering step forward and took my hands in his. His palms were hot and shaking slightly as they slipped into mine.

He paused, as if assessing. Then he exhaled, smiling, skimming his thumbs along the sensitive skin of my inner wrists.

He cleared his throat, his eyes glittering.

Did he look...relieved?

His hands slid up my arms. His eyes had a slight feverish look to them again, but this time they were dark with desire as they roamed up my body, my throat, my lips... The cords of his neck tightened, his breathing heavy.

I stepped closer, slipping one of my hands free to reach up and cup his face, to run a finger across his lips. Lips I hadn't kissed in too long.

“Aster—”

His head snapped away from me, nostrils flaring as he stared out across the Court. He stepped back, as if coming out of a trance, his features hardening.

“What is it?” I spun around.

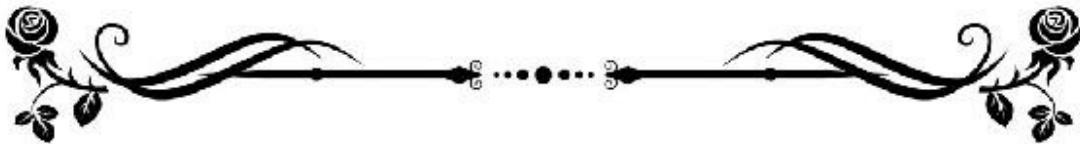
A dazzling beam of sunlight pierced the canopy, like a stream of melted butter pouring down to the forest floor.

Horns wailed, two long notes that cut right through me. I winced, resisting the urge to clamp my hands over my ears.

“The horns!” I shouted to make myself heard as I got to my feet. “What do they—”

“Intruders,” Thorne hollered back, his dark brow lowered. “The Sky Court. We’re under attack.”

## CHAPTER SIX



THORNE DASHED FORWARD, shadows rising from his shoulders, and moved closer to the edge of the ledge.

I stepped after him.

“No!” he barked, his eyes flashing in a way that reminded me of the Beast of the Folkwood. He quickly caught himself, his voice softening slightly. “I mean, you should wait here for me. Keep out of sight.”

I scoffed, stepping after him, grabbing for his arm. He wasn’t shadowing anywhere without me.

He darted out of reach.

“Thorne, *no*. I’m trying to prove I’m the rightful Queen of Faerie. I can’t be seen hiding from a threat. What’s gotten into you? You know I can protect myself.”

Thorne let out a low, frustrated sound, his eyes darting between me and the beam of light filtering through the trees.

“I’m powerful here in the woods. This is my element. You saw me kill the wyrm in the final Trial—”

“I know.” His voice was pained, but he shook his head.

“I don’t need your overprotective fae nonsense, okay? Not after everything we’ve been through together. I can deal with the other fae, with your family not believing in me...but not you.”

He blinked, my words seeming to sober him up. “You have nothing to prove to me.” He raked a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, petal. Let’s go.”

The sweet taste of metal slid across my tongue as his hand gripped my arm, and the beautiful views dissolved into shadows.

We materialized close to the blinding light, and Thorne instantly dropped

my arm.

The horns were louder here, the yells and clatter of guards filling the air. Most of them were Court Fae, males and females running gracefully to the clearing carrying elegantly carved bows and spears, a few with glossy shields of carved oak.

We joined the guards surrounding the shaft of golden light in the clearing. The ancient trees bristled around us as spear tips and arrows and swords leveled, sparkling in the sunlight.

The wailing horns faded, the guards falling still. The wind rustled through the leaves.

Thorne placed himself close to my side.

A shadow flitted within the beam of light, and my stomach lurched.

Then the light faded slightly, revealing a single, winged faery who hovered just above our heads.

No taller than my forearm, she was as willowy as a sapling, with a pointed chin, huge blue eyes, and masses of wispy blonde hair gathered in a loose bun at the back of her head. She floated down, her smoky-blue dress rippling around her, until she was level with the circle of guards.

The tension in my body released slightly.

“Greetings, *gentlefolk*.” Her high-pitched, chiming voice rang out as she eyed the guards’ weapons with amusement. Sweeping her blonde bangs to one side with a delicate hand, the faery gave a perfect curtsey mid-air.

*This was the Sky Court intruder?*

I felt a laugh of relief bubbling up in my chest.

“Hello, Levina,” Thorne said in a guarded voice.

I looked around. Every gaze was locked onto her...and none of the guards had lowered their weapons. Maybe she wasn’t as weak as she appeared...

“I bring a message from the newly crowned Alder King,” Levina began, a miniature scroll appearing in her hands in a burst of glittering motes. She unrolled it with a two-handed flick, a shower of golden dust flying out around her that had all of the guards flinching back.

“*Ahem.*” She cleared her throat. “First, despite the rumors that may be circulating about the coronation, know that King Faolan wears the Alder Crown.” Her wings fluttered as she spoke, rotating her so that she could address the entire circle. “It is the right of whoever wears the crown to change the laws as they see fit, and the king has now issued his first decree —”

“Oh?” Thorne cut in, prowling forward. “How unusual, Levina, for the Alder King to issue his first decree via a messenger.” His lips curved up in a satisfied expression. “Wouldn’t he usually make such statements at the coronation?” His canines flashed. “Unless, of course, he’s not convinced the crown will compel the other Courts to bend the knee...”

My heart lifted. Did that mean the Alder Crown might not be working for Faolan, after all?

Perhaps there was still hope of convincing the forest fae to back my claim...

Levina gave him a cool smile. “The Alder Trials this year were not...usual. The coronation was interrupted.” Her gaze flicked briefly to me. “Since *some* of the Courts scattered before the ceremony was concluded, King Faolan will call them back at a time that is convenient for him. Until then...” The faery lowered the scroll, reciting the next words while her eyes bored into Thorne. “Enchanting is forbidden. All enchanters and their enchantments are to be turned over to the Sky Court. *Anyone* harboring enchanters in their lands will be held in high treason.”

I stiffened.

Suddenly, the way the enchanters had treated me didn’t seem quite so surprising. I guessed Yoren was right that they had no choice but to go into hiding.

At least Faolan hadn’t ordered the enchanters to be killed outright. He was hungry for power—perhaps he’d see how he could use them before he killed them.

“Well, you can tell Faolan you’ve delivered your message.” Thorne stepped forward, the light from Levina’s sunbeam gilding his profile as his jaw firmed. “And that we were *very* interested to hear it. Now—get out of my Court.”

“I see King Faolan didn’t exaggerate when he described the Forest Court’s hospitality.” The faery gave a high, trilling laugh, then stopped suddenly. “Perhaps I wasn’t clear. This decree comes into effect immediately. Any Court harboring enchanters openly defies the Alder King.”

The scroll disappeared in a puff of glitter, and the faery’s blue eyes locked onto me. “That includes your pretty *mate*.”

Heat burned across my cheeks. She made the word mate sound like an insult, just like Kage and Neve had in the Trials.

Several of the guards flinched, adjusting their grips on their weapons.

Thorne still clasped his hands behind his back in a relaxed posture, although I could see the shadows rising from him like steam.

“Careful with your words, Levina,” he drawled. “You should be more polite when addressing your queen.”

“Queen?” She gave a wicked smile, hovering level with Thorne’s face. “There’s nothing on this human girl’s head but a bounty.” Levina raised her voice, her eyes blazing. “King Faolan desires one enchantress above all others. The bounty rewards any fae who delivers her...”

The winged messenger glowed brighter, the sunlight crackling and sputtering around her, a pressure swelling in the air. “He specified he wanted her alive... He said nothing about unharmed.”

She exploded toward me, arms outreached, as lightning fractured the sky.

Arrows whooshed through the air.

“Get down!”

I hit the ground hard, bones jarring, landing awkwardly as sizzling heat passed over my entire body. A high whine filled my ears.

The breath was forced from my lungs as a body thudded over mine. Cries and shouts rang out all around.

The weight lifted from me, and I pressed up to sitting, sucking in short breaths.

Arrows and spears sliced through the crackling lightning, the air fizzing with bright, hot light. Levina darted nimbly between searing flashes of her lightning magic, easily avoiding the weapons launched her way and obliterating others.

Her cackling laughter prickled across my skin like sunburn as she began to rise back into the sky.

*Is she giving up?*

A crack of thunder split the air, the bottom of the sunbeam she’d arrived in eaten up by shadow. The darkness emanating from...

*Thorne.*

He pulled me to my feet, and I stood, panting. My pulse tingled in my fingertips. He made no move to leave my side.

“Your face...” His fingers grazed the burn on my cheek.

“Thorne, she’s getting away!” My gaze followed her, my ears still ringing from the thunder. “Aren’t you going after her?”

Thorne looked at me blankly for a second, then nodded briskly. “Protect Aster at all costs,” he instructed the other soldiers before shadowing away

with a snarl.

The guards formed a tight circle around me.

Somehow, I knew which tree branch Thorne was going to appear on, my eyes darting to it a second before he materialized. *There.* Thorne threw a bolt of pure ice toward Levina, then leaped again before disappearing into shadow.

I could barely keep up with the speed at which he shadowed up through the clearing, summoning handfuls of magic from different Courts.

Levina's beam of sunlight looked anemic now, more silver than gold.

Dark-gray clouds swirled above the fading sunbeam like gathering night, illuminated by spears of lightning. Shadows rose like smoke from the canopy.

I stared up into the sky, now blanketed with thick clouds, the trees below wreathed in dusky shadows.

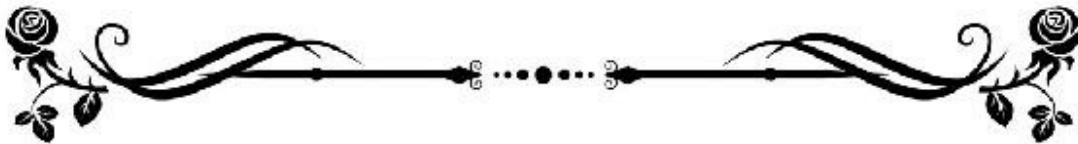
Drops of cold water hit my face, making me flinch. Then it began to pour.

Within seconds, my hair and clothes were plastered to me, the water cooling the stinging burns on my cheek.

“Thorne?” I cried up into the torrential rain.

But he was gone.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



“GET HER INSIDE!”

The chatter of light, fae voices rang out around me like the patter of the rain, sharp fingers digging into my arms, grasping at my sleeves, my skirts, my ankles.

The guards around me shifted, fast, ushering me toward a narrow doorway into one of the trees.

I ground my heels down into the mud, my jaw setting. If these guards thought they could just herd me quietly inside some Forest Court building, they clearly had spent too long with enchanters who pandered to the whims of the fae.

“Lady Wilden,” the closest guard addressed me, rain making her chestnut skin glitter. “You need to come inside. There might still be other Sky Court fae.”

For a moment I just stared at her. Silver bells—they thought I would just leave Thorne out here alone?

“Please, Lady Wilden,” the guard tried again, one hand reaching for me. “It isn’t safe—”

I jerked away from her. “Then it’s even more important I stay. *Thorne’s* still out there!”

I blinked rapidly, then lifted my hand, trying to clear the rainwater from my eyes. My gaze fixed on the dull point between the trees where the forest prince had disappeared, hurtling after Levina with a ferocity that still left a prickling sensation running over my skin.

Thorne was out there, facing that lightning fae alone—

“Ow!”

I spun as a gaggle of dimly lit sprites yanked hard at the ends of my hair, owlish black eyes wide in alarm.

“Come inside,” one of them hissed. “Not safe out here.”

I twisted my head back, raking my fingers through my sodden curls, trying to dislodge the sprites.

“Get off!”

They clung on, winding their limbs like ivy around my locks.

Giving up, I dragged the back of my hand over my eyes again before squinting through the deluge, the green of the forest distorted by the silver blur of rain. The flashes of lightning that had lit Levina’s path had long since disappeared, any haze of black smoke that might identify Thorne too dull to make out in the sudden downpour.

A low growl sounded in the back of my throat. I couldn’t see a thing.

“This folkdarned rain—”

Long, cold fingers closed around my arm, the wet material of my sleeve pressing damply against my skin.

“Silver bells, I *told* you...”

The words died on my tongue as I turned to see Queen Calla holding my arm firmly in her grasp. An intricate latticework of ferns spread from her waist then up and over her like a lantern, shielding her from the rain. The queen’s black eyes locked onto mine before she pulled me closer, beneath the web of foliage.

I inhaled sharply as the water stopped flooding over my skin, the heat of the queen’s fae body suddenly making me aware how cold I was.

She didn’t loosen her grip but offered a thin smile. “You will come inside. Now.”

As if to accentuate her point, a streak of lightning split the sky, the crash of thunder making me flinch.

Still, I hesitated, casting one look back up at the canopy.

“Lady Wilden,” she said in a cool voice. “You will come inside.”

“Thorne—”

“Will follow.”

The lattice of ferns whispered unnervingly above me as the plants shifted and stretched, threatening to cocoon us both.

I swallowed.

When I stopped resisting, the queen swept me along beside her. Her fingers still clamped firmly around my arm, she led me over to the doorway

and inside the Forest Court building. I blinked rapidly, the green faelight dim after the diffused sun-through-rain in the clearing outside. Above us, the latticework of ferns quivered, then dropped, floating along behind the queen in a shimmering train. She didn't leave me time for my vision to adjust but whisked me hurriedly along beside her, guards following in our wake.

We hastened along narrow, winding corridors curving up through the tree trunks, along thin bridges strung between the trees, then back inside the giant trunks that housed the main part of the Court, until eventually we halted outside a slim door surrounded by an ornate frame of carved oak leaves. The queen pressed it open and bundled both of us inside a dark room.

I jumped as all of the sprites that had been clinging to my wet curls leaped off, the air around them sparkling as tiny raindrops flew from their vibrating wings. They settled into the lamps, their greenish glitter casting a ghoulish light over the room, slowly illuminating the space.

I glanced around us. Thick-spined books and cream-colored scrolls lined the walls, while a huge, circular desk filled the middle of the room, an intricate map carved into the top.

My breath caught. The craftsmanship... This could only be the work of an enchanter.

I shifted closer to admire it. The carving was an incredible replica of the Kingdom of Faerie. In places, the wood had been carved into sharp mountain ranges, while elsewhere tiny leaves grew directly out of the table, like miniature forests. Real water curled through rivers winding their way through the landscape before pooling into a deep ring carved the entire way around the table's edge. I wondered whether it would taste salty if I dipped a finger.

I jumped as the queen brushed past me and sank into a chair. Impatiently, she gestured for me to do the same.

I glanced down. My skirts clung to my legs, while water pooled beneath me. I was already shivering. In fact, my whole body was convulsing.

Now that I was inside—safe—I knew what this was. Shock.

Faolan had put a bounty on my head.

Thorne might be the one fighting that lightning-wielding sky fae...but she had been sent here for *me*.

My gaze roamed the carved table to the north of the lush, green Forest Court, to where miniature stacks had been carved out, an ornate palace on top of them. The Sky Court.

“Faolan has always had a taste for drama.” Queen Calla’s voice sounded

close to my ear.

I turned back to find that she'd approached and was standing right behind my shoulder, following my gaze to the replica of the Sky Court on the north side of the table.

"He must have gotten it before he came here," she continued evenly. "He certainly wouldn't have learned manners like that in the Forest Court." Gently, she took hold of my elbow and steered me to a seat at the table. She snapped her fingers, and a brownie appeared as if from nowhere, a steaming cup of tea between its fingers.

As it pressed the drink into my hands, I was reminded painfully of Mosswhistle and all the times my friend had cared for me.

The tea sloshed as my hands shook, and the queen inched closer, the heat emanating from her warming me a little. "That little speech was all that was, you know. *Drama.*" Her brow pinched. "Still, it seems you have the sky prince worried, Aster Wilden..."

I suddenly found my voice. "He *should* be worried." I straightened in my chair, trying to keep my voice from shaking. "I already told you. He's not the rightful King of Faerie. But *I'm* the rightful queen."

Calla's narrowed gaze swept over me. Wordlessly, she placed two fingers beneath the bottom of my cup and lifted it upward, urging me to drink.

Warmth flooded through me as I sipped, more than I'd have expected from ordinary tea. I guessed it must be enchanted. Was it stupid of me to drink it without even questioning what it was?

Still, it was making me feel better, strength returning to my limbs and the panic ricocheting around my mind settling down.

Then the door slammed open again, and the queen leaped to her feet, a flood of metallic scent telling me she'd summoned her forest magic.

But it wasn't another Sky Court messenger threatening to assassinate me.

The deep-green cloaks of Forest Court guards whirled like torn leaves through the doorway as Thorne burst through, his green-flecked eyes landing searingly on me, like a predator homing in on its prey. "Aster!" Instantly, he relaxed.

"Thorne!" I lurched to my feet and shot forward, grabbing hold of his arm. "Are you okay? Did she get away?"

"I almost had her, but I was summoned back." He glared at his mother as he slid an arm around my waist. "I thought you'd been hurt."

"I'm fine," I reassured him.

A moment later, Ivye stalked inside, dusting her hands together. “Happy, Mother? He’s back.”

Ferne ducked in behind her. “And not soon enough.” He raked his hands through his sodden locks before running them down the front of his feather tunic, also damp with rain. “This is new, you know. And it’s *ruined*.”

“Lady Wilden.” Ignoring her children, Queen Calla pressed her hands together, eyeing the burns on my face. “Are you sure you’re feeling quite recovered after the attack?”

“Yes, I just said—”

“Good.” She turned to Thorne’s sister. “Ivye, please escort Lady Wilden to her chambers.”

My jaw dropped. “What?”

“You need to rest and heal,” the queen said. “I understand human bodies are much *frailer* than ours.”

“I’m not *frail*—”

“I believe you’ll be quite comfortable back in your room.” She spoke over me, turning to face Thorne. “Our healers will tend to her. But now, there is much to discuss about this afternoon’s events.”

“This afternoon’s *events* almost got Aster hurt,” Thorne challenged. “She’s not stepping out of my sight.”

The queen let out a sigh. “This afternoon’s events almost got you *killed*. Your words just prove you are *not* thinking rationally, Thorne. What were you thinking, instructing all of the guards to stay and protect Aster while you chased down Levina alone? Faolan could have had a whole garrison of Sky Court fae waiting for you.”

A low growl rumbled from Thorne’s lips.

“Thorne.” The queen’s voice softened. “The best way for you to look after Lady Wilden now is to let her go. She needs to rest, and we need to discuss how we will respond to the Sky Court. Without any...distractions.”

A muscle twitched in my cheek. Why were they so convinced I would be *distracting* for Thorne?

I looked over my shoulder and up at him. His brow was furrowed, his pale fingers clasping the edge of the carved map. “I am perfectly capable of making rational decisions, Mother,” he ground out.

“Are you?” Ferne challenged. “Right now? You’re feeling at your most *rational*? ”

Ivye snorted. “Like any fae can be considered rational when it comes to

love.”

Thorne shot her daggers, and she pulled a face.

“So what?” I managed, trying and failing to keep a petulant, childish tone from creeping into my voice. “You used me to lure Thorne back here and stop him pursuing Levina, and now you’re sending me to bed?”

Queen Calla’s insect-like black eyes swept over me once more. She blinked. “I believe I have made myself perfectly clear.”

“Thorne!” I turned to him in protest...and his brows rose apologetically.

“Perhaps my mother is right. You should go and rest. We’ll send a healer, and I’ll come to you as soon as we’re finished here.”

“I *am* a healer.” I took a step back, shaking my head in disbelief.

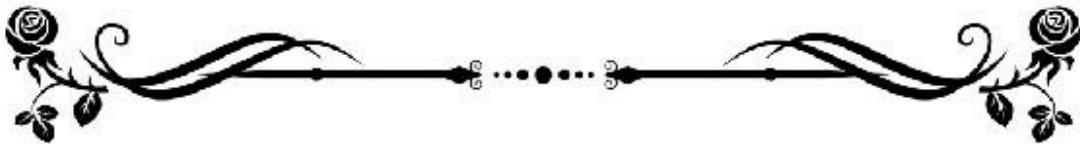
Ivye’s long fingers curled around my arm. “You don’t just have to stay in bed,” she whispered conspiratorially. “We can still go on *my* tour, if you’d like.”

I wrenched my arm away from her.

“There’s no need,” I said crisply, hurt lurching in my chest. “I’m very capable of knowing when I’m not wanted.”

Turning on my heel, I marched swiftly from the room before anyone could see the furious, hot tears brimming in my eyes.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



I SLAMMED the pestle and mortar down on the workbench. Flowers and herbs were strewn in messy bunches across the wooden surface—silver-and-green mugwort leaves, delicate chamomile flowers, gleaming orange rowan berries, and more, all lit up by pale evening light streaming in through tall windows.

As if I were going to rest in bed after the Forest Court had been attacked. At least Ivye had agreed to show me to where I might prepare my own healing poultice, leaving me inside an orangery for greenwitches, doors thrown open to a garden outside.

I supposed here I couldn't be accused of being *distracting*.

At that thought, I crammed a handful of dandelion roots into the mortar and began bashing them with every ounce of my strength, the clack of the pestle resounding so loudly that a flurry of Little Folk came hurrying out of the gardens, falling over one another as they peered around the wooden doorframe in an effort to see what I was doing to make such a racket.

My jaw set, and I pounded even harder at the roots. I'd made my healing poultice already, the skin on my cheek still tingling from the magic. But I hadn't stopped there. My hands heated as I poured my suppressed fury into the action, an enchantment I couldn't even name beginning to take shape.

I exhaled slowly. This place triggered memories of my workshop in Rosehill, at odds with the searing rage I felt at having been dismissed by the forest royals. The scents of drying herbs, loamy soil, and musty leather were familiar—although this room, with its intricate tiled floor and polished cabinets, was far more luxurious than my simple workshop back in Rosehill. The vast cabinets contained seemingly endless lines of gleaming tools, glass jars, and crystal decanters. Everything was labeled in a neat, swirling hand.

I peered through the glass and into the rain-damp garden beyond, where a few other men and women were picking plants, the wicker baskets in their arms piled high. Other greenwitches. I wondered if they were harvesting ingredients before leaving like the other enchanters...

They hadn't spoken to me, just glared in my direction when I'd first shown up here, but at least they hadn't set a flock of enchanted birds on me.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, sniffing loudly. I'd agree to come with Thorne to the Forest Court hoping to find allies. Friends, even. But not one person here seemed to take my claim to the throne seriously. The enchanters had made it quite clear I was their sworn enemy thanks to my actions in the Alder Trials, while the forest fae mainly seemed to think I was having some kind of bad influence on their prince.

I tipped the splintered roots into a jar and reached for a bottle of alcohol, pouring a thin stream over the roots. It almost seemed to simmer as it settled over the dandelion, my hands burning hot.

My brow creased. Thorne had seemed like he was about to tell me something before the Sky Court had attacked. Every single one of the fae royals was behaving so *strangely*. I just didn't understand why none of them would tell me what was going on...

All of a sudden, I knew exactly what this tincture would do. I had bottled confusion.

With trembling hands, I set the jar beside the line of others I had already prepared. As well as the bottles and jars of tinctures and syrups, there were also tiny cloth pouches filled with seeds and flowers and petals pressed firmly between sheets of paper. I would show the forest fae just how capable I was.

"It's like the ghost of Yvette walks among us." A soft, silky voice carried over from the doors out into the garden.

A chill ran down my back, and I twisted to see Yoren lingering in the doorway, a faint breeze lifting the ends of his long sleeves. He was dressed in dark gray today, silver embroidery spiderwebbing over the fine material.

"She always worked in here, you know. Away from the others." The enchanter moved across the room, and I noticed for the first time that his gait was slightly uneven. His floor-length robes hid it well.

He stopped at my side. "Our most powerful enchantress...and yet you, an untrained greenwitch, somehow disposed of her."

I swallowed but tilted my chin. "She threatened to kill me. And Thorne. I

had no choice.”

Yoren’s eyes never left me. He ran two fingers down his beard. “Would you give me a demonstration?”

The hairs lifted along the backs of my arms. “I didn’t kill Yvette with an enchantment.”

“No?”

My gaze returned to the bottled confusion between my fingertips. I’d stabbed Yvette in the heart using a simple iron knife. But it felt wrong to bring that up here, with someone who’d known her.

Yoren’s lips twisted up. “I watched you working just now. The way you weave your enchantments reminds me of her. The same intensity... The same power. But I suppose that makes sense, since you broke her curse.”

I breathed in and out very slowly. I suddenly realized I had no idea what Yoren’s relationship with Yvette had been like. Had they been close? Or had he been glad when she didn’t return from the Cursed Court at the Autumn Equinox, that a void in power had opened up ready for him to step into?

“And then you won the Alder Trials...” he murmured, his voice like oily fingers trailing over my skin. “All to return without the one thing you really needed. The Alder Crown.”

My head snapped up, my eyes wide as I stared at him.

“It would change everything, of course, if a human enchantress wore the crown upon her head.” His lips lifted again, revealing very white teeth. “Will you allow me to give you some advice, Aster?”

I pursed my lips, toying nervously with the end of my braid. “Why offer me advice if you don’t believe my claim?”

“I never said I don’t believe you.” His smile didn’t waver. “And no matter what the other enchanters think right now, I for one would like to see a human sitting on the throne.” He lifted a stray dandelion from the workbench, twirling it between his fingers. “I would like to see a human queen...and I would very much like a place in her Court. See, I’ve grown used to heading up the Enchanters’ Guild...”

Understanding slowly dawned.

Yoren was human, so there was no threat that I would accidentally stumble into a faerie bargain with him. But there was no question that he was hoping to strike a deal.

“I’d like to share something with you,” he said mildly. “Something the other enchanters don’t want you to know. Something I would be glad to share

with a future Queen of Faerie..."

"You want to lead a new Guild of Enchanters," I said slowly, "in a human Court. If I succeed."

Yoren's expression tightened. "I have lived with the fae a very long time now, Aster Wilden. If you want to succeed in the Fae Courts, you need to learn to speak more *delicately*."

"I take it that's a yes," I said drily.

His fist closed around the dandelion. "Then we are in agreement."

I paused, then gave a slight nod.

Yoren settled into a chair behind the workbench, clearing a space among the wildflowers I had strewn about before propping his elbows, hands clasped together.

"What you need to understand, Aster, is that while the forest fae respect the enchanters because of what we can provide for them, there are other things they value above all else. The Alder Crown is sacred to them. As I told you, they will never accept a monarch who is not wearing it. But if you wore the crown, and it accepted you, most of the fae would follow you willingly...and those who didn't could be forced to bend the knee."

"I already know all this," I snipped. "The crown channels the magic of all the fae kings and queens who wore it before them. It compels the fae to obey it." Frustration bubbled in my chest. "It's too dangerous for Thorne or any other fae to get close to Faolan—just in case the crown's working for him. But that's exactly why I need the enchanters' help."

Yoren pressed back from the workbench, wrinkling his nose as he dusted debris from his sleeves. "We are courtiers, Aster—artists, writers, musicians. We create beautiful and powerful things, but we have no magic in our bodies like the fae. Faolan might compel Thorne or the other fae...but he could easily kill a seamstress or a painter outright. Enchanters are not warriors."

I gnawed my lip, turning this over, then sighed. "Thorne said he didn't know if the Alder Crown's power would even work for a human."

Yoren's lips lifted. "Ah, yes. And that brings us neatly back to what I wanted to share with you."

Something in his tone had my gaze shooting to his. "What?"

He checked over his shoulder to ensure the other greenwitches hadn't strayed any closer to the orangery before turning back to me, his pale-green eyes flashing. "The Alder Crown was made by enchanters, Aster. It's Craft."

*What?*

My mouth dried. “But the crown channels fae magic. It controls the fae.”

“It does. But it was not created by fae hands.”

The Alder Crown was *Craft*.

My mind whirled with this new information. There was no question that the Alder Crown was a work of art. It was both fluid and angular at once, like tangled branches. I remembered how it had whispered to me at the coronation.

Then a chill splintered down my spine.

“But it’s made of *bones*...”

Yoren nodded slowly. “There hasn’t been a bonewelder in many centuries now. But an enchantment spun from death is powerful...”

I shuddered.

“Powerful enough to put a human queen on the throne.”

His words sank in slowly as I pieced this new information together with what else I’d learned over the last few days.

“Do you understand what this means, Aster?” Yoren rested his arms on the workbench again. “Because the crown was made by an enchanter, I’m certain it *will* work for you. If you can only get hold of it.”

“You’re *sure*?”

His shrewd eyes narrowed. “Well, there has never been a human monarch to wear it before.” He gave a light laugh. “But none of our kind would create an enchantment that powerful and make it so only the fae could use it.”

I stared at him a moment longer, then leaped to my feet.

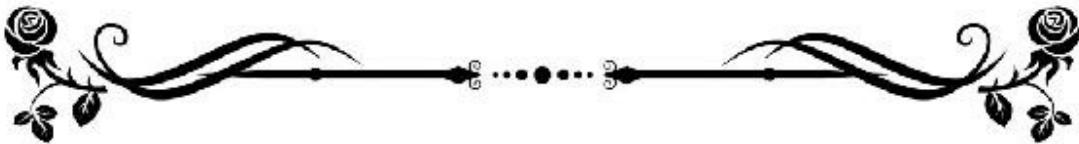
One of the reasons Thorne had given for not going after Faolan was that we had no guarantee that the Alder Crown would answer to a human master.

But based on what Yoren had told me... What he believed...

“Thank you,” I whispered before bolting from the room.

The crown might not be working for Faolan. But it *would* work for me.

## CHAPTER NINE



MY FEET POUNDED over the hard wooden floors lining the corridors.

*The Alder Crown is Craft.*

I still hardly dared believe it was true. But now that I thought about it, it made sense. The bone crown was a work of art. It would take the skill of a master sculptor to create something so beautiful.

Not a sculptor, though—a *bonewelder*.

I shuddered. I hoped I never met an enchanter who specialized in *that* particular Craft. I'd never heard of using bone as a medium before. It was morbid.

Bones should be left in the ground.

I skidded around a corner, praying that my feet remembered the route Ivye had led me along after we'd left the map room earlier.

No matter that I'd been banished from the Forest Court meetings; I needed to get back there. I had to tell Thorne what I'd discovered.

My heart lurched with relief as I turned another corner and spotted the door with its frame of carved oak leaves.

Drawing to a halt outside, I took a moment to slow my breath. The guards hesitated and exchanged a glance before shifting aside. I hammered on the door.

Almost immediately, it was opened by a short, androgynous fae with moss-green hair and slim, pale-green wings. A circlet of flowers ringed their forehead, while yet more blooms were embroidered onto their crisply tailored waistcoat.

For a moment I paused, my brow wrinkled in confusion.

I recognized this fae from the Alder Trials. *Ren*. The Flower Court heir.

What were they doing here at the Forest Court?

They grinned at me, their pale, pinched features lit up with a mischief that made me nervous. “Hello again, Aster Wilden. Or should I be addressing you as *Your Majesty* now?”

My cheeks heated.

“Hello, Ren,” I muttered. I paused, then added lightly, “Actually, I prefer *Your Imperial Majesty*...”

Ren let out a low laugh. “You know, in spite of you being a silver-tongued human, part of me was rooting for you to win the final Trial.” They opened the door more widely, revealing Thorne and Queen Calla sitting around the carved map I’d admired earlier. “It’s just so hard to keep track of who really is the Alder King or Queen in these troubled times...”

Queen Calla let out a barely contained sound of annoyance. “What are you doing back here?”

Thorne glared at her, then got swiftly to his feet, taking a few steps toward us but stopping partway across the room. “Is everything okay?”

“I have some news...” I shot the queen an irritated look. “It can’t wait.”

“In that case, sit,” Thorne said, gesturing to a seat at the carved table.

Queen Calla let out another huff.

I pursed my lips but relented when Thorne shot me a beseeching look.

“Come on then, Enchantress-Queen,” Ren muttered, steering me to a seat beside them at the table.

My gaze drifted to the patch of tiny flowers that swirled in the middle of the Forest Court on the carved map. Ren’s home.

“It looks small,” Ren’s voice came from beside me, “but my people can change size.” They extended a hand, their wings lifting them from the seat when they couldn’t quite reach far enough, so they could run one fingertip gently over the flowers indicating their home court.

“I mentioned I had a spy in the Sky Court,” Thorne said. He nodded toward Ren.

My eyes widened.

Ren had competed along with Thorne and me in the Alder Trials. They had been knocked out in the first Trial, after our team had unlocked our iron chest before they could unlock theirs.

But Ren had never shown any indication that they knew Thorne any better than the other heirs. Unlike Vanna or even Faolan, I had never seen the Flower Court heir rush to Thorne’s aid and couldn’t remember seeing Ren at

the Cursed Court. In fact, I didn't think I'd ever seen Ren and Thorne speak.

I recalled thinking how strange it was that the Flower Court and Forest Court heirs hadn't been closer, when the Flower Court was situated in the middle of the forest...

I turned to the spy. "And what have you discovered?"

"I thought your news couldn't wait, Lady Wilden?" Queen Calla hissed.

I hesitated. I wanted to tell Thorne what I'd learned about the crown...but I wanted to know what had been happening in the Sky Court since we'd left, too. "It's relevant to whatever Ren has discovered." I settled back in my seat, not dropping my gaze from her black eyes.

"It's fine," Thorne barked, waving a hand. "Aster can hear Ren's news, we can all hear hers, then we can pause before we discuss any of it."

I nodded.

Once Thorne heard my news, I doubted I'd be sent away again.

Ren withdrew from the table, dropping back into their seat. Their eyes slid back to me as they drummed the ends of their long fingernails against the table, the clack of their talons against the impeccably carved wood making me wince.

"Well, Thorne has just updated me on the happy visit Levina paid you," they said, for my benefit.

I nodded again. "Thorne seemed to think that meant the crown wasn't working for Faolan."

"Levina was right that the coronation was interrupted," Thorne explained, "but it's odd that Faolan hasn't tried to call us back since then. And one reason for that could very well be that the crown isn't working for him. If the crown isn't working, he can't compel any rebels to bend the knee."

Ren nodded. "Well, that certainly fits with all that I saw while I was still at the Sky Court. In the time that I was there, at least, Faolan hadn't used the crown's power to control anyone at all."

My heart flipped, hope spearing through me. "It's not working for him."

"Let the flower heir speak," Queen Calla snapped. But she turned anxiously to Ren. "If the crown isn't working for Faolan, that is, of course...significant."

Ren shrugged. "I can't say for sure. The Courts that lingered after Aster —ah, what did you say?—*interrupted* the coronation have all pledged their allegiance to Faolan quite willingly."

"The Shadow Court and the Frost Court, no doubt," Thorne murmured.

My stomach turned. Of course the Shadow Court would ally themselves with Faolan. Thorne had killed Kage, the shadow heir, in the Alder Trials, protecting me...and Neve, the frost heir, had died in the final Trial while Thorne and I had survived...

“The Desert Court, too,” Ren confirmed.

Thorne winced. “That’s a blow.”

Ren nodded. “Even so, the fact that Faolan is yet to call the rest of Faerie back for a coronation... My best guess is that he can’t use the crown.”

The three of them all turned slowly to look at me.

Thorne’s expression was solemn. He rubbed his lips together before addressing me, “Well, petal, it’s looking promising that the Alder Crown really isn’t working for Faolan.”

“It could be a trick of his,” Queen Calla interjected quickly. “We can’t jump to any conclusions, Thorne. It’s still too risky to assume the crown doesn’t answer to Faolan.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “We can’t be completely sure that Faolan can’t use the crown. But what if we could be sure that I *could*?”

Thorne stared at me blankly.

“What are you talking about?” Calla demanded.

I smiled sweetly at her. “Since you so kindly sent me out of these discussions to get some rest, I decided to see a little more of the Forest Court. And I had a *very* interesting chat with Yoren.”

“The enchanter?” Thorne frowned. “Why?”

A little thrill ran through my chest at the weight of what I was about to tell him. “The Alder Crown was made by an enchanter, Thorne. It’s Craft.”

“Craft?” Ren repeated, sitting up straighter.

“Impossible,” the queen breathed. “The human lied to you.”

Thorne didn’t respond, his brow furrowing.

I pursed my lips. I guessed it was *possible* that Yoren had lied to me. Still, what did the enchanter achieve by deceiving me? He had everything to gain if I took the throne.

“I don’t think he was lying,” I replied. “Besides, it makes sense. The crown is made from bone—but nothing naturally occurring could look like that. It has to have been sculpted by human hands.”

“We believe it was made by ancient fae magic,” the queen said shortly. Then, with a quick glance at Thorne, she added, “You must bear in mind, Aster, that humans can lie. I’m sure Yoren was very convincing, and he is a

very talented tailor.” She brushed a hand down her russet gown, the bust sewn with what looked like shiny elderberries instead of beads. “But the crown has been passed from fae monarch to fae monarch for centuries. Thorne’s father wore the Alder Crown for two hundred and fifty years. It was *fae* magic the crown bestowed on him, not human. The crown allows the wearer to control other fae.”

“I don’t believe he’s lying,” I repeated doggedly.

The ghost of a smile flickered across Ren’s face. The flower heir sank back in their chair, their emerald-green eyes fixing on me. “Imagine, an enchantress on the throne who might have significantly more power over the crown than any fae...”

I flushed. “I’m a greenwitch, not a bonewelder.” I sounded out the name Yoren had used. “The crown is Crafted from bone. I would have no power to change the enchantment on the crown itself...although I believe it will work for me.”

I turned to look at Thorne, whose lips were pressed together.

“Oh, no,” Ren said drily, arching an eyebrow. “You’ve got that look of yours about you. What are you planning next?”

Thorne brought his hands together, steepling his fingers, and offered Ren a rueful grin. “Well, first, I’m going to ask another great favor of you, cousin. We need a presence back in the Folkwood—in Rosehill. Aster’s home. We need to make sure Faolan doesn’t try to use her family against her. They’re at great risk now that we know the crown isn’t working for him. He might use them to lure Aster to him.”

A whine sounded in my ears, nausea rising in my throat. “Faolan—he threatened my sisters before. In the Alder Trials—”

Ren held up a hand. “Consider it done. I’ll go there myself.”

“Take as many of the Forest Court soldiers as you need with you.” Thorne turned to face me. “Now, our next mission requires stealth... We need to keep you out of the sight of fae eyes.”

“What mission?” I began, then frowned. “Why do I need to hide? Because of the bounty?”

Thorne’s expression turned serious. “Levina said Faolan wanted you alive. If the crown isn’t working for him...it probably means he plans to kill you himself.”

The blood drained from my face.

“You interrupted the Alder Trials by killing my father. If the crown’s

power passed to you then, it makes sense Faolan would think that by killing you, its power will at last pass to him. So we need to travel to where we're headed next without drawing any attention to ourselves."

"And where is that, exactly?" the queen said in a frozen voice. "Thorne, you still may not be thinking clearly. I'm not sure a stealth mission—"

"I plan to restore the Alder Queen to her throne," he interrupted. "And that means we need to take a little trip."

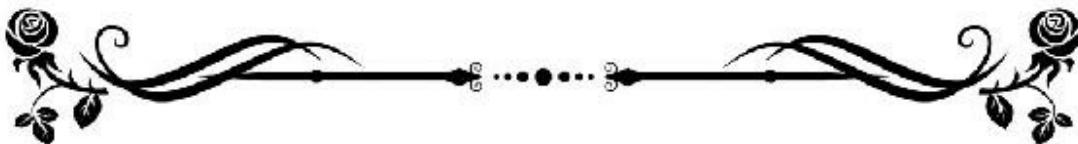
The queen pursed her lips. "You're acting on the words of an enchanter. A human. Who can *lie*."

Thorne met her gaze. "Exactly. And there's only one creature in all of Faerie old enough to know whether Yoren's words are true."

Queen Calla inhaled sharply. "You can't mean—"

"We're going to the Metal Court." He turned bright eyes to me. "To pay a visit to a dragon."

## CHAPTER TEN



I STOOD BACK from the bed, surveying the piles of rich fabrics—the outfits Thorne’s brother had been preparing for our trip to the Metal Court. I’d been expecting some kind of breeches, perhaps a warm cloak enchanted to keep out the cold. The kind of thing Laurel wore on her expeditions into the Folkwood. But this...

“Well?” Ferne asked, struggling to keep the impatience from his voice. “What do you think?”

“I think...” I blew out a breath, wiping the back of my hand across my brow. “I think this is a *lot* of clothes. We might only be there for a few days.”

I lifted one glittering dress, shimmering drops of dew clinging to a soft, gray material that I had an uncomfortable feeling might be spidersilk. As I shook it out, two translucent wings snapped out with a loud, insectoid click, casting rainbows across the floor.

Ferne made a tutting noise and snatched the dress back, carefully folding it up again. “You’re going to *need* a lot of clothes to look the part. You know you’re going to visit the Metal Court as Queen of the Fae.”

“We’re going to see a dragon,” I said lightly. “And Vanna knows what I look like. Wouldn’t something a little more *practical* be helpful? Something non-flammable, perhaps?”

A strangled sound came from Ferne’s throat. “I’m not sending you off in thick, woolen overalls. You’ll likely be presented to the entire Court when you get there, Aster. You might find it hard to believe considering how exquisite my own wardrobe is, but the Metal Court is widely regarded as one of the best-dressed Courts. They place great importance on fine and beautiful things.”

I loosed a slow breath at those words. It had been difficult enough to convince the Forest Court, who I'd assumed would automatically side with Thorne, that I was telling the truth. How much more difficult would it be to convince a different Court? I wrapped my arms around myself, gnawing at my lip.

Ferne's voice softened as he caught the change in my expression. "Lucky for you, you've got the help of someone who knows *everything* there is to know about fae fashions."

"Ha!" A high, sing-song voice carried from the entrance to my chambers. Ivye stalked inside, mischief lighting her face with a grin that made my stomach turn. "What poor Aster doesn't know is that *your* idea of fashionable isn't exactly to everyone's tastes."

Ferne drew himself up taller. "And what do *you* know? You've never even been out of the Forest Court."

Ivye tilted her head to one side and pursed her lips. "I know that for Autumn Equinox last year you wore a tunic made entirely of mushroom heads."

"And wasn't *everyone* talking about it?" Ferne hissed.

She smirked. "Yes, and you should have heard what they were saying."

Ferne pushed past his sister, handing me a gown in pale-pink silk with delicate silver details. "Here. Put this on, and I'll find a cloak to go with it."

I slipped behind a screen, changing into the slinky, silk dress Ferne had given me. "Is there a slip or something?" I grumbled. "This can't be it."

It felt like I was wearing a cloud.

I emerged from behind the screen, and Ferne clapped his hands together.

"Then this cloak." Ivye snatched a silver cloak from the crook of her brother's elbow. "To keep you warm." It was made of a thin, metallic material that looked like shining silver birch bark, which clearly Ferne believed would gain me favor in the Metal Court.

Ivye slung the cloak around my neck, fastening it at my throat with nimble fingers.

"Here you all are!" The queen's voice rang impatiently from the doorway. She hovered, not coming inside, her nose wrinkled. "And just why are we all congregating in Lady Wilden's rooms? I was very clear we were all to meet in the breakfast room to see you and Thorne on your way."

"We will," I said hurriedly. "Ferne was just helping me choose what to wear." I swallowed down the nerves that were now making my stomach

churn.

Ivye snorted, indicating the mound of clothes on the bed. “And, of course, he’s packed everything *he* would wear. Just how do you think Aster’s going to carry all of this?”

“I—er—” Ferne drew himself up even taller.

“Luckily,” Ivye spoke over him, “my parting gift for Aster is much more practical.” She swept up a satchel that she must have put on the bed when she’d come in. It was a soft design in shining brown leather, with delicate copper stitching and buckles that looked like leaves.

“Thorne said you carried one of these everywhere in the Cursed Court,” Ivye said, holding it up. “But it’s not just any satchel. I commissioned it from one of the leatherworkers at the Guild. No matter what you put in it, it’ll never weigh more than it does empty. Plus, it’s bigger on the inside.”

She handed me the satchel, the pungent smell of new leather filling my nose as I peered inside, grateful for such a thoughtful gift.

“Thank you, Ivye.” I clutched the bag to my chest. “This will be perfect for my enchantments.”

“And the dresses,” Ferne added forcefully.

“Those too.” I gave him a fond smile.

“How thoughtful of you, Ivye.” The queen still loitered in the doorway, her voice flat.

“Make sure you pack some practical clothes as well.” Ivye sashayed around the edge of the room, flinging open the closets and casting a critical eye over everything inside. “Did you even pack her boots, Ferne? Undergarments?”

Ferne threw himself onto the bed. “I don’t waste my eye for fashion on such boring nonsense.”

Moving rapidly, Ivye selected several items from the closet and tossed them on top of him. A sweeping cloak in a deep, inky green. A pair of soft, brown boots. The blouses and breeches I had pictured.

Ferne gave a squawk in protest from beneath the clothes. I laughed, moving them off him and adding them to my “to-pack” pile. At least I would have some normal clothes to wear in between the fae gowns.

“I thought we were meeting in the breakfast room?” Thorne’s loud, irritable drawl came from his mother’s side. “Didn’t you say we were meeting in the breakfast room?”

The queen raised a hand to her temples. “It seems my word means little

this afternoon.”

Thorne sighed and strode inside. “Well, we’re all here.”

I jerked my chin up. In a long, black cloak with a tall collar, a dark-green doublet beneath it, Thorne looked, well, *dashing*.

His eyes raked my new dress and cloak appreciatively before they met mine. “Ready?”

The butterflies in my stomach flapped all the more furiously. “We’re leaving right now?”

“Are you done packing?”

“Nearly.” I started shoving the clothing from the bed into the satchel.

Ferne sniffed loudly.

“Thank you, Ferne,” I added, aware of all the fae eyes on me, watching me pack. “I’m grateful to know that I won’t look out of place when we visit the Metal Court.” I turned nervously to the queen. “Thank you for—for being so welcoming.”

She gave a trilling laugh. “I think I will never grow used to lies tripping off human tongues so easily.”

My cheeks heated.

Her lips twitched. “May the light of the forest protect and guide you, Aster Wilden. I’m sure we’ll see you again very soon. And, Thorne.” She turned to her son, her brows high. “I hope you know what you’re doing. That you have everything under control.”

While Thorne pulled his mother to one side and spoke in low, reassuring tones, I carefully packed all of the greenwitch ingredients and enchantments I’d made during my stay at the Forest Court. Bottles clinked against each other as I slid them into the front pouch of the satchel, taking far more care over the paper packets and vials than I had with the clothes.

I slung the satchel over my shoulder, marveling at how light it felt and how comfortably it molded to my body.

Thorne held out his hand. “Ready now?”

I nodded, and his hand closed around mine, the heat of his skin burning into me. He looked around at his family, a steely glint in his eye. “We’ll let you know what the dragon says.”

“Try not to get burned alive,” Ivye said cheerfully.

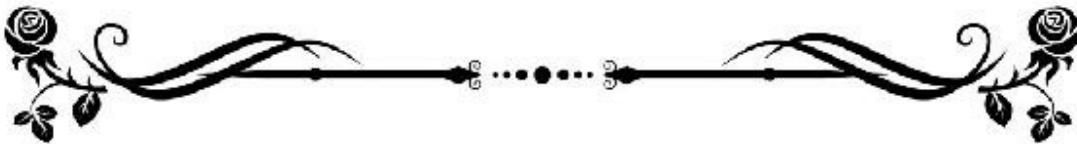
“And say hello to Vanna for me,” Ferne added keenly.

The queen bowed her head. “We will of course send our fastest ravens if we have any news.”

Thorne squeezed my hand. “Do you have everything you need?”

I took a breath, clutching at my satchel and holding his hand tightly. I had everything I needed, except answers. But we were about to get them.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



I BLINKED, the dazzling, honey-colored light bright after the shadowed rooms we'd left behind us in the Forest Court. The trill of birdsong warbled out, full and sweet and lilting, as thick foliage brushed my arms.

*What?*

I stepped away from the green cypress bush and glanced around, slowly taking in our surroundings. We were in a clearing ringed by leafless silver birch trees, their shining bark almost gold in the low light. There was still a nip of cold to the winter air, but there was warmth in the sun that streamed into the clearing, and I tilted my face up, absorbing the sunlight.

I squinted between the birch. More forest—glossy, emerald holly bushes, faded, rust-colored ferns, a hard frost glittering over the ground.

I had never been to the Metal Court, but somehow, another forest wasn't exactly how I'd imagined Vanna's home. And hadn't she mentioned before that it was underground?

I turned to Thorne, who had released me and stepped away from my side. I raised an eyebrow. "So all that talk about the Metal Court and dragons," I said lightly. "Was that just a cover? Were you planning something different the whole time?"

Thorne didn't reply for a moment, tilting his head from side to side and rolling his shoulders as he looked appreciatively around the woodland clearing. "I meant what I said. We're going to the Metal Court." A grin crept over his face. "Can't lie, remember?"

I spread my arms, gesturing around us. "Funny, the Metal Court looks surprisingly *woodier* than I pictured it..."

"We *are* going to the Metal Court. We just have a stop to make on the

way.”

I shivered beneath my cloak and pulled it closer. “If I’d known we were traipsing around the woods before arriving at Vanna’s, I’d have forced Ferne to dress me in something much warmer, and with more practical footwear.”

Voices filtered through the trees, and I froze, staring at Thorne. He tilted his chin, his pointed ears pricked toward the sound. He looked surprised but not concerned.

“What is that—?” I began, then recognition washed over me. “Humans?” They were close.

Thorne had barely nodded in confirmation before I was running through the skeletal trees, my cloak flapping open and an icy wind rushing over my body, chilling the silk beneath. The heeled shoes Ferne had dressed me in pinched my feet, and I gritted my teeth.

I stopped as they came into view, a ragged band picking their way slowly through the forest.

“The humans you freed from the Sky Court,” Thorne said quietly at my side. The heat of his fae body was like embers burning beside me. “They’ve traveled a long way to get here.”

*The Tithe servants.* There were so many of them... I had never known an exact number while we were in the Sky Court.

And they’d finally made it here, to the Forest Court. A fist squeezed in my chest. They’d made it out of the palace...and into the freezing forest, with no belongings, *nothing*.

Fae might not be bothered by the cold, but we humans weren’t built to withstand a winter outdoors. I tugged my cloak tighter, the weight of it around my shoulders heavy with guilt.

These humans’ eyes might be brighter, no longer dulled with ensorcellment, but they looked on the brink of death. Many still wore the thin, mushroom-colored robes of the Sky Court, slash marks bloodying the frayed material. Others hobbled along using large sticks as canes, arms slung around each other.

I moved closer to them, and they noticed me for the first time, turning toward me with wary eyes. They stopped altogether when they saw Thorne, flinching back.

“It’s okay.” I tried to sound soothing. “We’re here to help.”

My eyes skimmed the band of men and women, looking for a face I recognized, my heart swelling with hope that a tiny brownie would come

hurtling from the masses at the sound of my voice.

The freed servants looked at me through masks of exhaustion.

At the front, a little way ahead of them, I noticed a slender nymph dressed in Forest Court green, and behind her—

A tall girl spun around at the sound of my voice. “Aster?”  
“Mariyad!”

My maid from the Sky Court lowered her hood, staring back at me. Her dark hair was tied back, her cheeks drawn, her light-brown skin marred with three fresh scratches, as if sharp, tiny fingernails had clawed at her.

Her eyes filled with tears as she pulled me into a fierce hug. “I knew you’d make it out alive.” She addressed the people behind her. “This is Aster—the one who freed us.”

I held both of her hands, her fingers ice-cold to the touch as I squeezed them. “I can’t believe you’re here.” I frowned at her cheek. “What happened?”

“Just before we got to the forest border, we ran into a band of fae who were hunting a stag. They decided we would be better sport.” Her throat bobbed, lip trembling. “Not all of us made it.”

“Bethel?” I asked, my stomach shrinking. “Mosswhistle?”

Both of my friends were conspicuously missing from the group.

She shook her head, curls swaying. “They weren’t with me. We split up at the Sky Court... We thought moving in smaller groups would make it easier to hide if Faolan sent soldiers after us.”

“You’ve seen nothing of them?”

Mariyad shook her head again, letting go of my hands and glancing at Thorne over my shoulder. He backed away, keeping a respectful distance. “And what happened to you, Aster? The last we saw, you were running off to the coronation.”

I blew out a breath. How to explain everything that had happened since then? “I poisoned the Alder King,” I said. “I killed him. I stopped the coronation.”

Mariyad’s eyes widened. “Really? You actually did it?”

I nodded.

“So that means...you’re...”

“Technically the Queen of Faerie.”

Mariyad let out a bright laugh, and a swell of murmurs rushed through the group behind her. Glances that had once been wary now turned to something

else.

Hope... Awe.

“But Faolan has the Alder Crown,” I added quickly. My fists bunched in my cloak. “He’s claiming the victory for the Sky Court. I need to get the crown back again.”

“Then I’ll help,” Mariyad said firmly. “We’ll fight to put you on the throne. I’m not letting the fae enslave us again.”

The servants who were listening intently to our conversation nodded, calling out in agreement.

My heart clenched. These displaced humans were exhausted and injured. They had nothing...and yet still they were ready to turn right around and fight with me for their freedom.

A bitter taste crossed my tongue. In spite of all the magic at their disposal, the enchanters at the Forest Court had cared more about saving their own skins.

“I appreciate that.” My voice was tight. “But enough human lives have been forfeited already. I’m going to find a way to do this without a war. Once I have the crown, I can change the laws so that humans can rule ourselves. The title itself is just a means to an end to get the fae to accept that...” I considered the power of the crown. “The Alder Crown can force them to obey me.”

“Like an ensorcellment?” Mariyad’s brow creased. All of us humans standing here in the clearing knew what that felt like. Instinctively, I touched the rowan beads at my neck.

“Similar,” I acknowledged. “It’s more like a compulsion.” I shifted my satchel around, fumbling for the medicinal herbs I’d picked at the Forest Court and changing the subject. “Now...I can help heal you.”

Thorne’s voice carried over from where he had been talking to the fair-haired woodland nymph.

“Sorrel is taking them to Barks Hollow,” he said, “a human settlement just up ahead. Healers from the Forest Court will meet them.”

I nodded, my fingers stilling. It would take me hours to heal all of the injured here, and it was better for them to reach the settlement—to get out of the cold, to eat something.

Mariyad squeezed my hand again. “Will you come with us?”

I wanted to, but seeing the freed servants just served as a reminder of what I was up against. Whom I was fighting for.

“I can’t.” I shook my head in spite of the tug on my heart. “But I’ll come back and visit you when you’re settled. And if Mosswhistle arrives, will you ask one of the fae to send word to the Metal Court?”

She nodded and let my hands go.

“Come on, everyone,” she called back, injecting warmth and energy into her voice. “Not far now.”

The nymph leaped daintily forward, beckoning through the trees. The servants began their slow shuffle again. I stepped back, watching them pass, taking in every face, every injury, letting it fuel me.

I gnawed at my lip.

“Are you okay?” Thorne’s voice was low with concern.

“I’m fine, I just... I’m glad I saw them. I’m glad you brought me here.”

It reminded me why I was fighting for a fae title, to become a fae ruler.

We would never win in a fight. This was the only way humans would ever be listened to.

I tore my gaze from the last of the servants filtering into the trees.

“Actually...” Thorne began tentatively. “I didn’t know we’d see the Tithe humans today. I brought you here for something else.”

“This wasn’t the stop you had planned?”

“No—but it’s close, and we won’t stay long.”

“Okay,” I said softly, still mulling over the escaped servants and their injuries.

Thorne began striding along a narrow path ahead of us, the sun winking between the trees. I followed him in silence, lost in my own thoughts. After several minutes, the damp, leafy scent of the forest changed, tinged with something fresher—something floral.

I looked up at Thorne, trying to catch his eye. Curiosity flickered through me. “Are we nearly there?”

The forest prince didn’t reply, just picked up his pace. I tried to batten down my impatience at his silence. We swept along the winding path between the trees, the cool air nipping at my cheeks while the thin sun warmed the dark hair on the crown of my head. Leaf litter rustled underfoot, the scent damp and cloying and... I sniffed. The floral scent I’d noticed earlier was growing stronger.

But it was the dead of winter. There shouldn’t be any flowers blooming at this time of year...

I glanced to my side and started. In between the spiky holly and rustling

ivy, rhododendrons were growing, the green bushes covered in pale-pink flowers. Tall, purple alliums erupted from the forest floor—and as we moved farther along the path, these were joined by a riot of color: yellow-orange begonias, blue crocuses, flowers in every color—hellebores and lupines and nasturtiums and snapdragons...and blood-red roses.

The sight of the roses brought back the memories of the Cursed Court in a rush, making me stumble in my impractical heeled shoes.

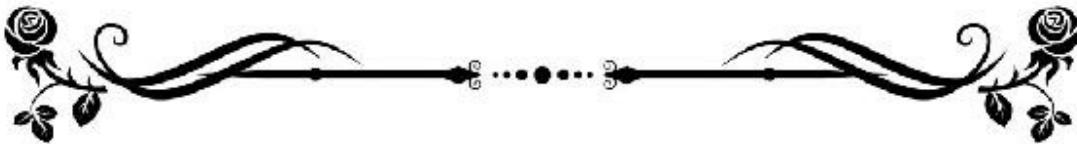
“How...” My words died, and I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Thorne, these flowers. How can they be blooming all at once like this?”

“I thought you’d like it.” Thorne’s voice came from just ahead of me. “We’re on the border with the Flower Court. There’s flower magic in the soil, so flowers bloom in this place all year round.”

My jaw worked for a moment. “The Flower Court. What’s in the Flower Court?”

His eyes gleamed. “Your gift.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE



HALTING ABRUPTLY, Thorne gestured just ahead of us.

A gasp rushed from my lips.

Nestled in a clearing in the woods was a rambling stone cottage, the front garden overspilling with flowers. I took a slow step forward. The white walls were almost entirely covered by hollyhocks, with calm-scented lavender lining the path to a green-painted front door. Smoke billowed from a tall chimney, wheeling against the pale-blue sky.

I turned slowly back to Thorne. “What...is this?”

He tugged me after him. “Come on, I want to show you the rest of the gardens first.”

We slipped through a little wooden gate and around the side of the house, past beds of vibrant marigolds and bushes laden with frilly peonies. The dull hum of bees buzzing sleepily through the air made my shoulders drop, and as we rounded the corner, the scent of sweet peas made my lips twitch up.

Everything about this place made me feel...calm. Centered. Better than I had since Faolan had spirited me away from the Cursed Court.

Thorne halted on a little porch at the back of the house. A table and chairs nestled under a slanted wooden roof, overlooking the mess of flowers, the greenery doing its best to creep onto the porch and cross the threshold of the house.

My gaze flicked to the table, the scent of polish tickling my nostrils. It was immaculate. But while the porch had evidently been very thoroughly cleaned just recently, the garden... The garden looked abandoned.

I swiveled back around, lifting one hand to shield the sun from my eyes, and surveyed the yard. Everything was overgrown, long green stems bolting

skyward, faded petals drifting to the ground where things hadn't been deadheaded. Beneath the chaos of plants, I could see the wooden edges of raised beds closer to the house, as though there might once have been some sort of kitchen garden here, the circular shape of an herb wheel a few steps away. Beyond that, it was hard to make out what some long-forgotten gardener might have intended.

"There's a lot of potential for someone to really make something of this garden, don't you think, petal?"

Thorne's tone was light, but when I turned to shoot him a look, his face was pale, his lips pressed tightly together. He tugged at the shirt at his neck, his brow slightly furrowed. He looked...nervous.

"Thorne." My voice was soft. "What is this place?"

"You like it?" he asked gruffly.

I nodded slowly. "It's beautiful."

His shoulders lowered, and some color warmed his cheeks again. "Well, that's good. Because it's all yours."

My stomach flipped. "What?"

Thorne spread his arms. "It's a gift. From me."

My jaw dropped. "A gift? What for?"

He shifted from foot to foot, moving to the back door. There was the jangling sound of keys, the click of a lock, then a creak as the door swung open. "I know it's not the expensive jewelry you said was traditional for human engagements..."

My heartbeat ratcheted up a notch. A light, delirious feeling curled in my stomach, spreading warmth through my body.

But Thorne had already swept inside, forcing me to hurry in after him.

Inside, I halted immediately. The simple, quaint kitchen was lit by hundreds of candles, matched only by the number of roses in narrow vases that lined every surface.

In the golden flicker of candlelight, Thorne's fae beauty was as dazzling as our surroundings. He took a step back toward me, and the corners of his lips quirked up at my stunned expression. "You didn't think I'd subject you to living with my mother, did you?"

I choked back a laugh, tears blurring my vision as I shook my head.

Thorne showed me around, each room more perfect than the next. The kitchen was bright, spacious, and smelled deliciously of apples and cinnamon. Another room contained a long wooden table, laden with vases of

flowers and yet more candles, where I could imagine inviting my father and sisters over to eat. A fire crackled in a snug room lined with vast, plump armchairs; four-poster beds smothered in thick blankets settled in bedrooms with soft rugs underfoot; I even found a tiny library with ladders to reach the highest shelves, in which I was thrilled to discover books on botany and flower meanings. In every room, there were more vases of flowers.

It was exactly the kind of home that I would have chosen for myself. But there were signs Thorne would be living here as well. Enough crockery for two, crystal decanters of spirits on the sideboard, a polished bow for hunting ready in a boot room.

Thorne cuffed one hand against the bottom of his chin. “I thought this might be a good place for us to call home. When we’re not at Court.” He moved closer, and the heat of his body seared the sliver of air between us. “Somewhere for you to grow the plants you need for your enchantments...” He gazed down at me. “What do you think?”

“What do I *think*?” A giddy laugh escaped me as I wrapped my arms around his waist. “It’s perfect,” I whispered against his chest. “Just—perfect.”

He tensed slightly in my tight embrace, then relaxed. “We’ve been talking about marriage as a political arrangement. For fae, marriages often are—but I want to marry you because I *love* you. I’m not marrying you for a title. I don’t care if you’re the Queen of Faerie. I want to marry you because you’re Aster.”

Tears suddenly pricked at my eyes. I reached up and pulled his face closer, intending to press my lips against his, but he shifted, his lips grazing my cheek instead, then skimming down my jaw, my neck. Heat seared through me, and I let out a sigh.

“Aster,” Thorne groaned.

He pulled back, and the blush in his cheeks mirrored the burning sensation in my own. His predatory gaze was slightly unfocused, like he was drunk on my scent...

He froze for a second, then stepped away from me, swallowing hard as he moved to open a window. He fumbled with the latch then took deep gulps of cold air.

“Thorne,” I said, still slightly breathless. “Are you all right? You’ve not been yourself for weeks.” I frowned, worry interrupting my pleasure at his proposal. “I’m a greenwitch, I know how to diagnose when someone is acting

oddly.”

The crackle of the fireplace filled the silence.

Thorne stared down at his boots, running his tongue along his teeth.

I crossed my arms. “Are you going to keep pretending like nothing happened to you at the Forest Court?”

He met my gaze, then slowly shook his head.

“Then *tell* me.”

“It’s a fae thing.”

“Oh, it’s a *fae* thing,” I repeated, unimpressed. “Care to elaborate?” When he didn’t reply, I continued. “Are you sick?”

“I have no disease or illness, I promise you.”

“Then what is it?”

He took a shallow breath. “I had a...fae reaction, but you’ll find I am perfectly well.”

*A fae reaction?*

“A fae reaction to *what*? What brought it on?”

Thorne blew out a breath, taking a moment before responding. “My family seemed to think it was returning to my home Court.”

“And whatever happened to you—it’s a common thing? It happens to other fae?”

Thorne nodded slowly. “All the time.”

“Then why didn’t you just tell me?” My voice was still stern.

“For many reasons. I wanted to protect you. I didn’t want you to worry.”

Despite my irritation, something warm blossomed in me at his words. My tone softened. “It’s our job to worry about each other. You can tell me anything, and we’ll figure it out together.” I shifted closer to him. “I want to look after you, just like you want to look after me.”

“I know. I’m sorry. But it’s under control, I promise.” Thorne looked around the cottage as if he might say something else, then closed his mouth again. After a moment, a knowing smile curled his lips. “So you accept my proposal?”

“Thorne.” I still wasn’t completely convinced by his explanations...but he couldn’t lie to me. If it really was some kind of fae reaction, and it really was under control, I would trust him. “Of course I accept. This place—you really—you *know* me.” I closed the gap between us, sliding my hands into the thick strands of his hair. My voice dropped. “I love you, Thorne.”

His body stilled beneath my touch, his chest rising and falling.

“I love you too, Aster,” he breathed, his eyes bright. “And I will do everything in my power to make you happy and keep you safe.”

I let go of him, gazing helplessly around the beautiful, candlelit cottage. He had already done so much. And his words, when fae couldn’t lie... It was a powerful vow.

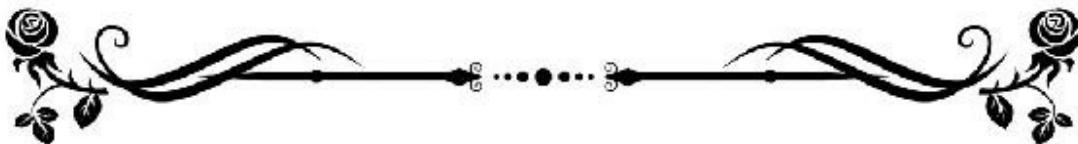
I took in his full lips, flawless skin, and angular jawline. He looked out of place in such a homely, human cottage. Like an exotic flower.

His eyes darkened as he studied my face so intensely, I thought he might kiss me again. Instead, he cleared his throat and wrapped one arm around my waist. “We’d better be going. Vanna’s expecting us.”

I thought ruefully of the four-poster beds just upstairs. I wished we could have had some time here, just us, away from the world and the weight of responsibility that came with retrieving the Alder Crown.

Thorne snapped his fingers, extinguishing all of the candles in an instant, his shadows joining the curls of smoke.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



NOTHING COULD HAVE PREPARED me for the sheer size of the Metal Court.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Thorne murmured from beside me, his breath clouding in the air.

A mountain towered above us, the entrance to the Court a huge door built into the rock face. Above us, the sky was a piercing blue, the air sharp and cold. I shaded my eyes from the bright afternoon sun, tilting my head back and squinting up at the dazzling metal door yawning above us.

“And if this is just the front door,” he continued. “Folk knows what it’ll be like inside...”

I turned to him. “You’ve never been here before?”

Thorne had lived for so much longer than I had. I’d imagined he’d traveled to every corner of the Kingdom of Faerie.

“Much to Vanna’s disappointment,” he said. “She spent most of her time at the Forest Court when she was with Gael, so I never visited her here. And then...”

“Yvette cursed you,” I finished.

Thorne dipped his head, pain flashing across his eyes.

I hastily changed the subject. “If this peak belongs to the Metal Court, where’s the Mountain Court?” I tried to remember the enchanted map I’d seen back in the Forest Court.

“It spreads across the entire range.” Thorne gestured into the distance, where a line of jagged peaks sawed across the horizon. “Technically, we’re on the fringes of the Mountain Court now. The Metal Court is underground, inside and below the mountains on the east side of the range.”

I tried to imagine what an underground Court might look like but could

only conjure up images of damp, cold earth, with no light or plants. Like a rabbit's burrow.

I was also grateful for the plants I'd enchanted in the Forest Court. Even outside, there were no plants at all here, just frost chapping dark rock. Herbs and poultices clinked in jars as I shifted my satchel on my shoulder.

I took a step closer to the doors. There didn't seem to be any guards who had been alerted to our presence.

"Do we just..." I stared up at the metal with a frown. "Knock?"

The metallic patterns created a huge dragon motif, its wings spread wide on either door, the bulk of its body made of overlapping scales in silver and gold and bronze, all sparkling in the light.

*We're going to see a dragon.*

I shivered again, and this time it had nothing to do with the cold. Taking a step closer, I rapped my knuckles against the door.

The cold metal bit into my hand despite barely making a noise.

Thorne gave a low snort.

I glared at him, rubbing my pink knuckles. "Is there something funny, beast?"

He smirked. "I'm sorry, I thought you wanted Vanna to know we're here."

I folded my arms across my chest, wondering if I should dig out an enchanted bottle from my bag and throw it at the door. Or Thorne's head.

"Fine. You knock, then, if you think you can do it better."

Thorne took a courtly step forward, then banged the side of his fist against the metal once. The door clanged like a gong being struck. He knocked twice more. The sound reverberated through my teeth and shook the ground. In the distance, rubble skittered down from somewhere higher up in the mountain.

"Show off." I shot Thorne a pert look.

He smirked. "What use is my incredible Mountain Court strength if I can't use it on huge, foreboding doors?"

My retort was drowned out by the clanking of metal and the shriek of hinges. The doors began to rumble inward.

I took a step back, then another.

The winking rubies that formed the dragon's eyes split apart as the doors creaked open...and the dull echo of shrieks, roars, and screams resounded out.

I resisted the urge to clamp my hands over my ears at the wild, inhuman

sound.

“Vanna’s expecting us, right?” I murmured, my eyes fixed on the slither of darkness between the metal doors.

The doors pulled back enough to leave a long, narrow column for an entrance.

A lone figure stepped forward, clad in a shimmering copper gown.

*Vanna.*

I relaxed almost immediately as she sashayed toward us, a brilliant smile on her face. When she reached us, she pulled Thorne into a hug.

I glanced behind her, but there was no one else—no guards, no welcome party, no nosy Little Folk clamoring to get a look—nothing to explain the distant roars emanating from her Court.

Vanna turned to me, and I readied myself for one of her hugs that squeezed the breath from my lungs. Instead, she dropped to one knee, drawing a bejeweled sword that I hadn’t even noticed from across her back.

She dipped her head. “Aster Wilden. True Queen of Faerie. My fealty is yours.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. “Vanna, stand. There’s no need.”

“Is that a command, my queen?” When she tilted her head up, she was grinning.

I huffed and reached out a hand, pulling Vanna to her feet. “The ornamental sword and the kneeling are a little much—but since I know you can’t lie, I appreciate the sentiment.”

Vanna pulled me into a hug, my ribs protesting almost immediately as her arms clamped around my sides. “I saw what happened at the coronation. I believe your claim, and I’ll help you however I can. Both of you.” She stepped back. “Let’s go, I’m freezing my jewels off out here.” She waggled her fingers, rings glinting in the sunlight.

The moment we followed her through the gap in the door, the roars grew louder.

I scrunched and then widened my eyes, trying to adjust to the change in light and see what could possibly be causing such a racket.

Vanna strode ahead of us along a hallway that matched the giant proportions of the exterior door. Enormous golden bowls of flickering flames lined the corridor, burnishing the polished russet stone of the walls and huge staircase descending into the earth at the end. The sound seemed to be coming from down there, carried toward us on a thick, warm breeze that

wrapped around me like a second cloak.

“What’s going on?” I tried to sound calm, but my voice came out high and thin. This reminded me uncomfortably of arriving in the Forest Court, when I’d been expecting an audience with Queen Calla and instead been presented to all the forest fae. “Am I...going to meet *all* of the Metal Court?”

*Better to at least be prepared this time.*

Our larger-than-life shadows stalked along the walls behind us, making me feel like we were being followed.

“Not that I’m not pleased to see you here, Aster,” Vanna called back as her footsteps rang out on the stairs. “But I thought it was safer not to announce you to the rest of our Court after Faolan’s decree.”

So Faolan had visited every Court to demand my capture. Wonderful.

I hesitated at the top of the staircase. The stairs stretched down, lit up by smaller bowls of flames, to where another huge, metal door glimmered at the bottom. It rattled ominously at its hinges each time the roars cried out again.

“The metal fae don’t believe in Aster’s claim?” Thorne asked sharply.

Vanna slowed, tossing her long braids with a sigh. “Everyone’s heard the rumors of what happened at the Trials, but Faolan’s supporters are spewing propaganda to make the fae think the worst of the enchanters. It will take more than just my reassurance for *any* fae to bend the knee to you now that they know you’re an enchantress...”

I wrung the strap of my satchel between my hands, matching Vanna’s brisk steps.

I now understood exactly what it *would* take. The Alder Crown.

“Still, my parents have agreed to receive you.”

Thorne blanched. “Your parents are helping us?”

Vanna gave a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’ve convinced them to support your claim. They’ll help.” She cocked her head. “We’re going to see them now. They’re just finishing something off.”

Thorne didn’t reply. He let Vanna get a few steps ahead before lowering his voice and murmuring to me, “Vanna’s parents aren’t exactly my greatest fans...and by extension, they’re not too keen on the Forest Court, either.”

“Why?” I dropped my voice to match his.

“They were happy when Vanna and I first became friends. They thought it would lead to a favorable political union between us.”

“But instead,” Vanna chipped in, not missing a word of our exchange, “a mating bond formed between me and Gael, one of Thorne’s best friends. He

was a Court Fae, but with no title.”

Vanna had told me about Gael. He had been part of Thorne’s cadre before Yvette had had them all killed.

Thorne looked a little sheepish that Vanna had overheard our conversation.

“You can’t help who your mate is,” I supplied, hoping that would reassure her.

“I know.” Vanna’s voice softened. She stopped at the bottom of the steps, in front of a vast bronze door that gleamed in the soft, warm light. It pulsed and rattled with the beat of fae voices ringing out from behind it. “But my parents would have preferred it if my mate were a prince. To them, Gael was not worthy.”

Thorne cleared his throat. “But even though they didn’t like it, the king and queen could never stop two mates from being together. They couldn’t blame Vanna, so instead they blamed me for introducing them in the first place.”

Thorne and Vanna held each other’s gaze. Vanna’s large, honey eyes shimmered in the firelight. My heart twisted. I’d seen her look happy and angry and serious, but never sad.

“If you like, I can tell them Thorne’s not the great catch he likes to sell himself as,” I deadpanned. Both fae looked at me, Thorne with a raised brow and Vanna with a light snort.

“Well, now’s your chance.”

She pressed open the bronze door...and the roar and scream of fae cheers billowed out.

My jaw dropped, all of the hairs raising along the backs of my arms despite the warmth.

We emerged onto a narrow stone balcony edged with a gilded wall that glittered with jewels. Huge urns sprouted plumes of flames instead of plants, and a sharp, metallic taste that I had come to associate with fae magic settled on the back of my tongue.

Beyond, the room dropped away entirely.

I took a couple of tentative steps forward, mouth hanging open.

A huge chamber hollowed out the rock, rows of stalls cut into the sides, the roar and scream of the fae crowd resounding around the cavernous space. Everything glittered, the rocks sparkling with metallic geometric patterns, reminding me of the way Vanna had transformed the Cursed Court for the

revel.

The patterns glimmered in a rainbow of colors, and when I tilted my head back, I quickly realized why. A huge window was hewn out of the rock high above us, Crafted out of panes of precious jewels that sent colored light dancing down into the Court.

I took a step forward, unable to tear my eyes from the shining, colorful window.

Then a blur of gold hurtled past me, the whistle of wind sending me leaping back.

“Silver bells!” I exclaimed, my arms wheeling.

Vanna grabbed the scruff of my cloak, yanking me away from the edge of the balcony, and I stumbled back with another loud curse.

I looked down, and my stomach flipped.

Distracted by the splendor of the room, I hadn’t even noticed what was happening in the cave-like chamber before us.

Two shining chariots, like the one Vanna had used to visit Thorne at the Cursed Court, raced around mid-air, following an intricate track that appeared to be marked out by jeweled flags sticking out from the rock at various intervals.

The speed at which they traveled... It was almost too fast for me to follow, the chariots little more than a bright blur, one in gold and one in silver.

I caught my breath, certain that at any second one of them must smash into the looming rock.

“Come on.” Vanna grinned, nudging me with her elbow. “The Royal Box is over there.”

She indicated a balcony to our left that was hewn entirely out of pure gold, embedded with precious stones glinting in every color. A chandelier hung above it, glowing and sparkling with the lights of a thousand tiny flames. It cast a glitter on the two huge thrones below, lined with plump, velvet cushions.

They were empty.

My brow creased. “I thought you said we were meeting your parents?”

I edged after Vanna, keeping one side pressed firmly against the rock wall.

“We are,” she said.

I looked back at the thrones. “Are they...glamoured?” I tried.

“What?” She turned around, her honey eyes puzzled. I indicated the thrones. “They’re not there.” “Oh!” She let out a light laugh. “You’re looking in the wrong place, Aster.”

She turned back to where the silver and gold chariots whizzed through the air in front of us.

I followed her gaze, my steps faltering. “That’s your *parents*?”

I cut a glance back at Thorne, who looked just as taken aback as I did, his eyes narrowed as he watched the two chariots hurtling around. Like Vanna’s chariot at the Cursed Court, they seemed to fly without being pulled by anything at all.

I swallowed, suddenly a ton more nervous about meeting the Metal Court royals. “So...is this a revel?”

Vanna barked another laugh before swishing along the narrow balcony toward the Royal Box. “A revel? More like your average evening in the Metal Court.” She shot a wicked grin back at Thorne. “Although, now I come to think about it, you *should* visit when we’re having a revel sometime. I promise, you’ve never seen anything like it.”

A jolt ran through me as I realized Vanna couldn’t lie...and if even Thorne had never seen a revel like they held here in the Metal Court, what must they be like? I wasn’t sure I wanted to find out.

We followed Vanna around to the Royal Box, the guards sweeping aside for their princess and her guests.

“They won’t be long now,” Vanna commented, her gaze following the streaks of shining metal as the chariots sped again around the course.

One of the Little Folk popped up over the edge of the balcony. I eyed its scaled skin curiously. It looked a bit like a lizard, with a dozen short legs that it used both to cling to the rock and to clutch steaming cups of wine.

It handed one to Vanna, who accepted it without tearing her eyes from the race.

“Who’s winning?” Thorne asked mildly, watching with interest. He helped himself to another of the cups.

I stiffened as the fae scuttled up my right leg, extending a short arm and waving a steaming cup at me.

I shook my head, and it chattered furiously before wriggling back down my leg and disappearing over the edge of the balcony, shooting me one last disgusted look as it went.

*Who knew a lizard could look disgusted.*

“Mother,” Vanna muttered in reply to Thorne. “By quite a stretch. Something must have happened while I came to fetch you.”

“Ah.” Thorne cricked his head to one side. “So your father is going to be in a great mood. No doubt he’ll be extra pleased to remember we’re visiting, too.”

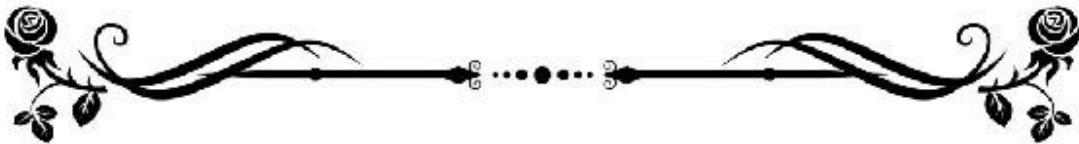
All three of us leaped back as the gold chariot squealed to a halt on a ledge of rock just beside us, the room erupting with wild screams again.

Barely a moment later, the silver chariot screeched onto the balcony behind it.

A figure jumped over the side of the gold chariot, swiftly followed by another from the silver chariot. As they reached up to remove their helmets, the fae hollers grew even louder.

The king and queen of the Metal Court.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“IT WAS CLOSE,” the king shouted over the cries, removing a pair of fine leather gloves studded with rubies and throwing them to one of the waiting Little Folk. “It could have gone either way.”

“Ha!” The queen swished a flowing fur cloak back over her shoulder to reveal a pale-silver outfit that was part armor, part revealing gown, with an intricately wrought metal breastplate flowing into a long skirt. “You’d like to think so.”

I gawped at them, as always struck by the beauty of the fae.

Both were tall, with the same dark complexion as Vanna. In human years, they only looked to be about ten years older than their daughter. I suspected that the glinting silver strands woven through the queen’s braids were not a sign of aging but a fashion choice—her onyx eyes were unlined and her skin flawless.

I stifled a yelp as something smooth brushed past my legs.

A gaggle of Little Folk—gray-skinned goblins, knuckled trows, and bluecaps with flickering blue flames atop their heads—bearing rags and pails of water hurried over to the chariots. Their squabbling, bickering tones cut through the air before they began dunking the rags and scrubbing at the wheels.

“Congratulations, Esolde.” Thorne stepped forward, sweeping into a courtly bow. “And may your equally impressive skill lead you to victory next time, Lazul.”

Queen Esolde turned toward us, letting out a low chuckle while her husband’s cheeks turned a light purple.

“Ah, yes. Vanna did tell us you would be visiting.” The queen’s voice

was light yet commanding. “Welcome, Prince Thorne...”

Her gaze swept disinterestedly over Thorne before coming to rest on me.

King Lazul stepped closer, teeth flashing as he smiled. “Our daughter tells us this human is *Queen Aster*.”

I shuffled the bag containing my greenwitch supplies behind me, setting my shoulders. “King Lazul. Queen Esolde.” I ignored the urge to drop into a curtsey and instead bobbed my head courteously. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

The queen inclined her head, the metallic highlight along her high cheekbones gleaming, her sharp eyes running over me.

The king raised a hand to his chin, stroking the smattering of dark stubble. “So, you’re the girl who freed the forest prince...” He exchanged a glance with Queen Esolde. “You seem perfectly ordinary.”

“And yet she won the Alder Trials, dear.” The queen’s eyes glinted. “Let’s not be so dismissive.” She glanced around her before snapping her fingers. “Now, we all need a drink.” She flashed her husband another smile. “To celebrate my victory.”

The many-legged lizard fae scuttled back over the edge of the balcony, fresh cups steaming in its grasp.

The queen snatched a cup and held it aloft. “To recent victories.” She gestured in my direction, the edges of her lips curving up.

Thorne lifted his own cup, as did Vanna, and my cheeks heated as I realized I had nothing to toast with.

King Lazul delicately took a cup from the lizard fae but didn’t drink from it, the steam curling around his fingers. He glanced around, then stalked over to the thrones and sank down into one.

“Now, Vanna told us that you would be visiting...” He slowly crossed one leg over the other. “But she didn’t tell us why.” A shrewd, predatory look shone behind his eyes, a deep blue flecked with gold.

Thorne returned a blithe smile, draining the end of his cup before replying. “We were hoping to speak with Nythoss.”

My heart flipped, the reason for our visit sinking back in after the shock of stumbling into the chariot race. “That’s the dragon you keep here?”

I glanced warily back over the balcony. This cavern was more than large enough to imagine a huge, winged creature flying around in here.

I jumped back as the lizard fae popped up yet again, still chattering and waving a cup in my direction.

“No one *keeps* a dragon,” Esolde corrected with a light laugh.

I tried to bat the lizard fae away as inconspicuously as I could.

Vanna smiled apologetically. “It’s more that dragons simply deign to let you live in their presence. But yes, Nythoss is one of the many dragons who live alongside us beneath the mountains. They like to be around the jewel mines and the treasure, although they come and go as they please. In rare cases, a dragon will form a magical bond with a certain fae whom they’ll accept as a rider.”

“A bond?” I asked, my curiosity piqued. “Like a fae mating bond?”

Vanna nodded. “In the sense that it’s forged in magic, yes.” She moved to stand beside her father. “Nythoss isn’t bonded with anyone, even though he’s the oldest living dragon in the Metal Court. He runs our forge here, but he doesn’t have much to do with the fae. He prefers working with the Tithe humans.”

My stomach gave a twist at the casual mention of enslaved humans, like I’d swallowed a mouthful of thorns.

*They have Tithe servants in the Metal Court?*

Of course, what had I expected? This Court was different again from the Sky Court, from the Forest Court...but the Tithes took place everywhere. Anywhere you went in the Kingdom of Faerie, it wasn’t safe to be human.

Vanna didn’t seem to notice as I chewed the inside of my lip, my body tense.

“And what interest do you have in speaking with Nythoss?” King Lazul asked in a calculating tone.

“We have some questions about the Alder Crown,” Thorne said evenly. “It might help us take it back from Faolan.”

Queen Esolde gave a languid shrug before taking a seat on the throne next to her husband’s. “We will request an audience with him,” she said, her musical voice echoing slightly in the cavernous space. “Though I must warn you, Nythoss rarely accepts a request for an audience, and even if he does accept, he may not tell you what you need to know. Dragons are even trickier than the fae.”

“I’d recommend taking a gift,” Vanna added with a wink.

Before I could ask what kind of gift one takes an ancient, standoffish dragon, the king spoke again.

“I suppose even if Nythoss rejects your request,” he said in a slow, satisfied tone, “you’re at least here in time to celebrate the good news.”

My brow wrinkled.

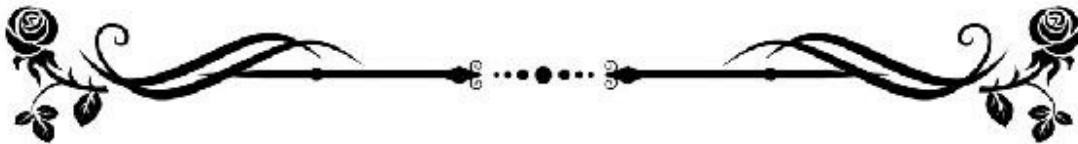
“The good news?” Thorne echoed, suspicion tingeing his voice.

He shot a look at Vanna, who pressed her lips together, uncharacteristically silent.

“She hasn’t told you yet?” The queen’s voice rang out. “Our daughter is recently engaged.”

King Lazul leaned forward on his throne, a satisfied smile crossing his face. “To Prince Morven of the Mountain Court.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



THORNE AND VANNA weren't speaking. And it was awkward.

"These are all human Craft." Vanna indicated a huge display of swords, her voice echoing through the chamber as she gave us a tour around the Metal Court.

The weapons hung from the wall on fine golden chains, without any glass to contain them. They gleamed in the light from the many bowls of fire cupped against the walls, their pommels and matching scabbards encrusted with gemstones.

I glanced back at Thorne, a step behind me, and winced.

His eyes glittered dangerously, a furious, impenetrable expression stamped across his face. The air was thick with the heavy pressure of his magic, as though a storm was about to break.

I had no doubt it was only a matter of time.

"They look beautiful," I acknowledged in a small voice, doing my best to ease the tension, or at least to fill the silence left by the absence of Thorne's usual banter with Vanna.

Of course, I was no swordsman, so it was hard for me to really comment on the quality of these weapons, but there was no question that the swords were exquisite to look at.

Still... I pursed my lips, not voicing my next thought. We were supposed to be looking for a gift for Nythoss. But what would a dragon need with a sword?

Vanna drifted to the next display. "And these are all dragon-made."

I peered closer.

"Dragon-made?" My gaze landed on a huge hammer made of gold, veins

of smoldering fire running through the metal. “No one could lift that...” I murmured, half to myself. “Well, maybe Thorne could, but only someone with Mountain Court strength.”

Thorne huffed a snort over my shoulder. “Perhaps a gift for your new betrothed, then?” he said to Vanna, the first time he’d addressed her since we’d heard about her engagement.

Vanna’s eyes narrowed, a metallic heat searing the air along with the prickle of Thorne’s magic.

“Do you think Nythoss would prefer a dragon-made gift?” I said quickly. “If he accepts an audience with us, that is?”

“Dragons like rare and beautiful things,” Vanna said, turning slowly back to me. “They choose to live here and work in our mines and forges because it gives them access to precious metals and rare jewels, but of course, they already have access to the weapons we have here...” She broke off, planting her hands on her hips, her sharp gaze fixing behind me. “Will you stop huffing and puffing and just say what you want to say?”

I swiveled around.

Thorne stood with one leg across the other, inspecting his nails. “You already know what I have to say.”

“Then you should have no problem saying it to my face.”

*Uh-oh.*

I’d had enough verbal sparring matches with my siblings to tell when an argument was about to get heated.

A savage smile crossed Thorne’s face. “Of all the bad decisions you’ve ever made, Vanna, I think this one might just be the worst. You can’t tell me you’re really going to marry Morven.”

*And there it is.*

I flinched back, the magic swelling fiercely between the two Court Fae once again.

Vanna smiled back, her canines flashing. “You think *you* can tell me what I can and can’t do?”

“I think I owe it to you to tell you when you’re making a mistake.”

Vanna stretched out, a soft glimmer slowly running up from her fingertips to her elbows, gilding her skin.

“I’m perfectly capable—”

“The only time I’ve ever heard you speak of Morven before is to comment on his idiocy,” Thorne said in a steely, clipped voice. “I’ve heard

you call him a meat-headed buffoon, a stinking hound, a fury brute—and that's just at this year's Alder Trials—”

“That was before we were betrothed.”

Shadows curled from Thorne's clenched fists. “That makes it even worse. You expect me to believe you've suddenly changed your mind?”

“Enough, both of you,” I cut in. I gave a brittle smile, trying not to grind my teeth. “Vanna, I think what Thorne is *trying* to say is that he wants to make sure you're truly happy. He's voicing his concerns because he cares about you.” My voice tightened. “He cares that you're giving up your chance to marry for love.”

Vanna's shoulders dropped. “That chance died with Gael.” Her wide eyes found Thorne, her next words a whisper. “You should understand that, Thorne. You know what it's like for us. Gael was my one true mate, the other half of my soul. And I was luckier than most to have found him, even for the short time we had together.”

Her eyes glistened, and Thorne's face creased into a pained look.

Vanna brushed the back of her hand across her cheek quickly. “Aster, my betrothal to Morven gives you an alliance with both the Metal and the Mountain Courts. I'll never marry for love. So I may as well marry for a cause I believe in.” She glared at Thorne. “Yes, it's a political alliance, but it's one I've gone into with both eyes open.”

Thorne raked a hand through his hair, his tone no longer heated. “Do you even like him?”

Vanna gave a one-shouldered shrug. “It doesn't really matter.”

We stood in silence, Vanna and Thorne staring at each other.

I suddenly became very interested in the polished stone floor beneath our feet.

I remembered Morven well from the Trials, although I didn't recall him having any real interactions with Vanna. The huge, fae male had been in Thorne's and my team for the first Trial and insisted throughout it was a test of strength. In the second Trial, he'd tried to drag his boat across the frozen lake using an oar to smash the ice.

Morven hadn't thought much of humans, so if this alliance meant he would support me over Faolan, marrying Vanna must offer some benefit to the Mountain Court, too.

I glanced up at her. She'd looked away from Thorne now, her arms folded across her chest and her hip jutting out to one side.

“So... This hammer,” I changed the subject, realizing no one had spoken for a good few minutes. “You said it was dragon-made. Does that mean dragons can use Craft like humans?”

Vanna blinked, her eyes brightening like a spell had been broken.

“It’s different.” Thorne spoke first, his voice low. “Somewhere between human Craft and fae magic.”

Vanna nodded. “Dragons are creatures of magic, but unlike fae, they can Craft things.”

“You said the dragon prefers the company of...the Tithe humans.” My stomach soured as I stumbled over the words.

Vanna’s features softened. “They’re more helpful in the forge.”

“The Metal Court only requires a ten-year indenture,” Thorne added quickly, as if he could sense my unease. “The Tithe humans that work here are volunteers. They are able to send a portion of the jewels and metal mined back to their families in the human settlements.”

*Volunteers?*

“So the humans...want to be chosen?”

“There are always more humans volunteering than we need, so we choose them from a lottery,” Vanna explained. “Being chosen ensures riches for their family and a life of comfort once their ten years are finished.”

“And they all work in the forges?”

“They can choose. They have the option to work as Court servants, in the mines, or in the smithy. The dragon is blind, so he relies on the humans to help with many aspects of running the forge.”

My outrage on the Tithe servants’ behalf was soothed as an idea flickered to life. Of course, if the dragon preferred human company over fae, that already gave me an advantage. But Vanna had just given me a clue as to what he might value most above all else, and it wasn’t the treasure he was surrounded with on a daily basis.

“Has he always been blind?” I asked Vanna in a casual tone.

“I don’t think so. The stories say he retired beneath the mountain once he lost his sight. But this was a long time ago, way before the time of even the oldest living fae in the Metal Court.”

I mentally sifted through the contents of my bag.

Then I tilted my head to Vanna. “I think I know what gift to give Nythoss. But I’ll need to enchant it first.”



I picked through the jars I'd unpacked from my satchel, wishing I'd spent some time organizing them rather than just tipping the contents out over the stone workbench.

Vanna had given me a workspace that might once have been a human forge. It had been different working in here, underground, compared to the gardens and workshops I'd worked in as a greenwitch. But as I'd gotten used to it, I'd slowly found it easier to slip into the state of flow I needed to be in to cast an enchantment.

Which was exactly what I needed to do in order to Craft a gift for the dragon.

Thorne leaned closer. "So explain to me again what you're making?"

"Incense," I murmured. "It's a...compact stick of herbs that produces a nice-smelling smoke when you burn it."

"Sounds delightful, petal," he drawled. "But are you sure a dragon will need a gift that produces smoke?"

I lifted my gaze from the sage to see Thorne watching me, his full lips pulled back into a half-smile.

"It's not *just* smoke. I'm enchanting it. And if you can't keep your sarcastic comments to yourself, you can leave. I have to concentrate."

His lips took on a slight pout. "I'll be quiet. I like watching you in the flow." He paused for a few moments, an intense look crossing his face. "I like watching you all the time."

"If a human man had turned up at my workshop and announced that, I'd have called him a creep and set Laurel on him," I commented, sorting through the ingredients I'd brought with me.

"Luckily, I'm a devastatingly handsome fae prince," Thorne replied with a wry smile.

I glanced up to chide him, and then found that I couldn't disagree.

The bright light of the torches illuminated the silky darkness of his hair, bringing out the subtle russet tinge the sunshine usually did. His hazel eyes looked darker than usual as he watched me sort through ingredients, and one of his canines softly pressed down into his full bottom lip.

My mouth dried. "Count yourself lucky you've got such a pretty face," I muttered. He was such a distraction, even when he wasn't trying to be.

I cleared my throat. "Will you fetch me some scrap metal? Something

that won't be missed. I need to use it for the base."

Thorne took a slow step back, as if it actually pained him to leave my side. When he caught me watching him, he grinned and dipped into a shallow bow.

I held up a hand before he could shadow away. "And no more arguing with Vanna if you see her."

"I'll... I might argue with her. I can't lie to you."

"You can't lie to *anyone*. Now go."

His wolfish grin disappeared into shadows.

I shook my head as the mist of darkness cleared in his wake, leaving the lingering scent of rosewood.

*Right, the incense. Concentrate, Aster.*

I picked up a handful of dandelion seeds first. On a whim, I'd used these tiny, fluffy seeds once before in an enchantment that had given me a vision of a happy memory of Rosehill. I thought of my family now as I added the seeds to the mortar and pestle, grinding them into the dried sage leaves, sandalwood, and red joss powder that would form the base and binder of the incense.

My hands heated as I let memories of Rosehill fill my mind.

Laurel, Ava, town dances, the day Sage had accepted me as her apprentice. The first time I'd healed someone by myself.

I smiled.

Next, I added dried rowan and mugwort for divination, grinding as the happy memories swelled my chest, even though they were tinged with bittersweet sadness that I wasn't there, that the path of my life had led me far from my family and my hometown.

A few strands of hair had fallen loose from my braid, and I tucked them behind my ear, murmuring the names of the plants to myself as I added them to the mixture. The soft grind and clack of the pestle filled my ears, my hands working automatically.

I uncorked a tiny bottle of the verbena oil I'd made yesterday, adding a few drops to make the enchantment more potent.

Finally, I poured a little chamomile tea—for happiness—into the powder, slowly working it until the mixture came together. I reached for where I'd piled up thin sticks of wood and rolled each in the paste in turn until they were neatly coated, leaving a little on one end clear. Now they just needed to dry.

The smell of crushed herbs wafted up to me, and I let out a deep exhale, my hands stilling.

I closed my eyes, a wave of tiredness washing over me as my fingertips stopped tingling with heat. The enchantment was complete.

When my eyes flickered open, I jumped to find someone watching me.

I gave Thorne an arch smile. “Creep.”

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” he protested.

I reached out my hands, beckoning Thorne over so I could inspect the scraps of metal he’d brought me. Unmarked coins, a glittering necklace...

“These all look expensive,” I said dubiously, moving closer and turning them over in his palms.

Thorne shrugged. “Everything here is expensive.”

I winced. I could easily believe that. *Everything* in the Metal Court sparkled and gleamed. I hadn’t known so many jewels and precious metals could exist in one place.

And yet I’d rather have walls covered in ivy than studded in gems any day.

“Can you melt the metal down?” I asked Thorne. “I want to make a dish to hold the incense sticks.”

Thorne had told me that his magic from the Metal Court allowed him to melt metals with a touch. “Of course. I can’t make it into anything though,” he reminded me quietly, his gaze lowered.

That would count as Craft.

“What happens if you try to use Craft?” I asked tentatively. “If you tried to cook or sew or sculpt...?”

A muscle flicked in Thorne’s cheek. “The magic in our bodies finds a way to stop us. It’s different for every fae, depending on their magic. A feeling of burning, or freezing, or choking that stops you from moving, from thinking.”

“What happens to you?”

“My head hurts, and I black out.” The way he said it so lightly made me realize that it was probably much worse than he was making it sound.

He held out the handful of metal he’d brought, rings and other trinkets glinting. Without him saying a word, the metal dissolved, a shining liquid filling his cupped palms.

I peered closer, mesmerized. I’d never seen metal move like water before. “It doesn’t burn you?” It took some effort to resist the childish urge to dip my

finger in.

He shook his head.

I lifted one of the sticks of incense and dipped the wooden end into the liquid metal so it was embedded in the liquid gold at an angle, keeping my fingers well back.

“Can you make it solid again?”

Instantly, ice crept up the backs of Thorne’s knuckles. A low hissing, sizzling sound filled the room, steam billowing from his palms.

When he removed his hands, a shallow golden dish remained, bumpy with the imprint of his fingers. The incense stick jutted up at a slightly slanted angle. I wiggled out the stick, checking that I could swap in the others I’d made when this one was finished.

Thorne set the enchantment on the table with a quirked eyebrow. “It’s—er—a bit homemade looking...”

It was nowhere near the quality of craftsmanship of the beautiful weapons and jewelry Vanna had shown us earlier.

But this gift wasn’t made to just be looked at.

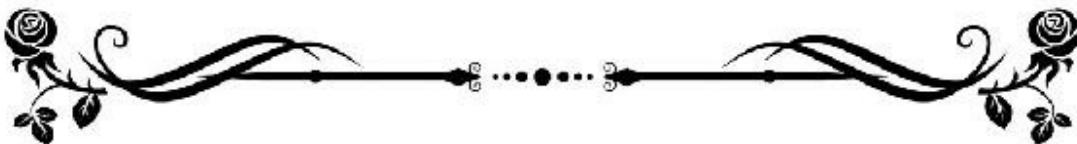
“Its value doesn’t lie in its beauty,” I rebutted.

Thorne shifted to my side. “I suppose it’s a good thing the dragon is blind...”

I swatted him playfully as Vanna appeared at the door, breathless.

“You’re finished? Good.” She didn’t give me a chance to answer. “You need to change for dinner immediately. Morven has arrived.” She locked eyes with Thorne as she said her betrothed’s name, challenging, but he remained quiet. “He has some very interesting news from the Sky Court.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



VANNA'S CHAMBERS glittered with more weapons and jewels than I'd seen even on our tour of the Metal Court treasury, her fae wardrobe filled with gowns and armor.

I ran my hands down the lilac dress I'd changed into for dinner, one of the outfits Ferne had packed for me. Actually, *dress* seemed like too strong a word for the floating petals that draped over my body, exposing just a little more skin than I was comfortable with any time the layers caught in a wayward breeze.

And if a dress sewn out of real petals wasn't extravagant enough, Vanna had cheerfully added a touch of her metal magic after summoning me to her chambers.

The petals were a soft purple at my waist, fading slowly to lilac...and now finally to palest silver where they brushed the floor. The straps at my shoulders were wrapped in shining silver, while my bust sparkled with a necklace dripping with diamonds and crystals that Vanna had slung around my neck.

The metal princess had piled my hair up on top of my head to draw attention to the shining metals and stones at my décolletage and shoulders, a headdress of matching diamonds and amethysts weighing heavily on my head.

Lastly, she had presented me with an unusual piece of jewelry—two shining ear covers, studded with pearls, that brought the tips of my ears to delicate silver points.

"Now you look like a fae queen," Vanna said with an appreciative glance as she stepped back.

“I didn’t realize looking like fae royalty would take quite so much time,” I grumbled. When Vanna had told us there was news from the Sky Court, I’d imagined changing quickly into one of the dresses Ferne had packed for me and racing straight to dinner.

Instead, it was almost an hour later, and I was still itching to hear what had been happening in the Sky Court.

I tugged at the front of the dress, uncomfortably aware of how much skin was exposed each time it slipped lower.

Although I had to admit it—dressed like this, my own sisters might have mistaken me for a fae queen.

Vanna gave a light laugh that sounded like tinkling coins. “The fae don’t worry so much about time.”

I hummed, unconvinced. “Or human practicalities.”

“This isn’t a garden, Aster. You don’t need a pair of ugly boots and an apron. We’re attending a fae dinner.” Vanna turned to the mirror, pressing back her curly hair with a golden headband that matched her outfit and the flecks of paint around her eyes.

“Exactly. Not a revel. A family dinner.”

“A *royal* dinner.”

I huffed out a breath. At least Vanna was in a similar state of dress—or undress—as me. Her gown was made entirely of metal gold feathers that overlapped like scales. They hugged her hourglass figure tightly, flaring out at her shoulders.

At last, she deemed both of us ready and led us out of her chambers. Our gilded skirts scraped softly against the polished stone floors, the sound echoing through the gaping corridors. Like all fae, Vanna was light of foot, and as she moved, she looked like a golden phoenix, gilded by the lantern light.

I tapped more slowly along behind her. I bit my lip as I noticed how the low-cut back of her dress revealed the swirling vines and leaves of the forest motif climbing up her back... I wondered what her new fiancé would think about her having a tattoo dedicated to her mate.

“Are you and Thorne friends again?” I asked.

Vanna exhaled sharply out of her nose.

I took a few quick steps to catch up with her, placing my hand on her arm. “He only wants you to be happy. You’re his best friend.”

If I were being honest, after being forced to kill his entire cadre and

Faolan's betrayal, Vanna was probably Thorne's *only* friend.

"I know," she admitted. "He's just being such an ass about it."

I stifled a laugh as two fae guards pushed open the doors in front of us...and the sound of metal clashing against metal spilled out into the corridor.

I winced. *What now?*

Vanna stepped inside first.

"The Queen of Faerie," she announced, stepping to one side with a flourish and gesturing me through.

I stepped more hesitantly into the cavernous hall—and my breath caught in my throat at the sight of it. High above our heads, huge golden stalactites hung from the ceiling, the gilded spikes interspersed with glittering chandeliers that sparkled like a handful of stars tossed toward the heavens. The room was filled with the scent of rich faerie wine, roasted meat, and heavy perfume.

Then another loud clash drew my attention back down to floor level.

A circle of metal-clad soldiers was putting on some kind of military display, wielding impossibly ornate weapons that gleamed as they swung in swift, elegant arcs. It looked almost like a dance as the soldiers whirled and stepped neatly around one another, bringing their swords up to clash together at regular intervals.

I cut a glance at Vanna. "Will the king and queen be sparring before we eat?"

She smirked. "Not tonight. They're already waiting for us." She gestured to a long, rectangular dining table in the center of the room, just visible between the procession of soldiers. "Come on."

Linking her arm through mine, she led us forward.

The soldiers all halted in place the moment we drew closer, shifting so that we could pass through the long line of them. Huge, roaring fireplaces set back into the walls emanated a soft, orange glow that licked across their armor, making it look as though they were dressed in flames.

I exhaled as we moved away from them, suddenly realizing I had been holding my breath as we'd passed the heat of their bodies.

The dining table looked tiny compared to everything else. The guests sat around the table in huge, golden chairs, and, as I scanned their faces, I realized they were all staring at me.

The back of my neck heated as I remembered what I was wearing. I

pressed my shoulder blades back, suddenly very aware of my hands and what I was doing with them as I walked slowly around the table to the vacant chair at the head Vanna had directed me toward.

My stomach dropped at the prominent position I'd been awarded at the table.

Thorne lurched to his feet, his hazel eyes dark and fixed on me as he moved around to pull out my chair. Drawing strength from his assured movements, I made myself give the gathered fae a slight incline of my head.

How things had changed since our first dinner together at the Cursed Court, when Thorne had made me drag my own chair across the room. Now he looked at me with such barely concealed *want*. It made me feel powerful and nervous in equal measure.

I slowly lowered myself into the chair, resisting the urge to tug at the front of my dress again.

“You look...enchanting.” Thorne’s whisper brushed the shell of my ear before he took his seat again, his eyes still drinking me in. A hot flush burned up the back of my neck at the look in his eyes...a mix of desire and pride.

“Well.” A booming voice came from my left-hand side, followed by what sounded like a howl. “The human scrubs up well, doesn’t she? What a *dress!*”

My eyes found a grinning Morven. The huge, muscled fae filled the throne next to Vanna, a furred pelt that matched his ash-brown hair thrown over his shoulder despite the warmth of the room.

The rest of the table was filled with Vanna’s family—or so I assumed from the family resemblance. They were all dark-haired, brown-skinned, and beautiful, with the same angular chins and honey eyes. Cousins perhaps. Or aunts and uncles. Their fae beauty made it impossible to guess their true ages and relation to one another.

The king and queen exchanged a glance at the far end of the table, opposite me.

“Careful, Morven.” Thorne’s teeth were gritted, shadows curling from his knuckles where he gripped the arms of his chair. “That’s the Queen of Faerie you’re addressing.”

Thorne looked like he was holding himself back from leaping across the table and throttling the Mountain Prince. I guessed he still hadn’t gotten over Vanna’s engagement news.

Morven tilted a jewel-studded goblet my way. “I watched her crush an

earthwyrm like a bug during the Alder Trials. I know she's the Queen of Faerie." He inclined his head, his nostrils flaring for a second before he smirked at Thorne. "And that she's spoken for, of course."

The clash of weapons rang out around us again as Morven took a deep swig of wine. He looked slightly more presentable than when I'd seen him at the Trials. He appeared to have run a comb through his shoulder-length hair, at least. While he still had the ethereal beauty of the fae, there was a rough-hewn, wolfish edge to it that—combined with his hulking presence—set my teeth on edge.

Queen Esolde cleared her throat. "It's inappropriate to make such comments while you're sitting next to your betrothed, Prince Morven."

Vanna smirked into her wine, not looking at all bothered by Morven's observations but enjoying watching the color drain from his cheeks.

The huge Mountain Court fae spluttered into his cup, spraying wine onto the table. "Yes, well... It goes without saying Vanna also looks beautiful..."

"Congratulations on your betrothal," I addressed him for the first time.

Morven muttered his thanks, casting a furtive glance toward Vanna, who tilted her head back and drained the last of her faerie wine.

Her glass had barely touched the polished table before one of the many-legged lizard fae scuttled up the table leg, wielding a gleaming silver jug.

A moment later, an irritated yell and clatter sounded as more Little Folk scurried into the hall, interrupting the weaponry display. I jumped as a bat-winged faery thumped softly down onto the table before me and began ladling a fragrant, green-gray soup into my bowl.

"Vanna said you had news from the Sky Court?" I directed my question at Morven just as the bat-winged fae launched itself back up into the air. I hesitated before voicing my greatest worry. "Has he repealed the law not to hurt humans?"

Morven held his glass out for the lizard fae to fill, oblivious to the daggers the rest of the Metal Court were glaring at him.

"Faolan has only made one official decree so far," he began. "Outlawing enchanters. Oh, and there's that bounty he put on your head."

"So we heard," Thorne commented drily.

Morven acted like Thorne hadn't spoken. "He hasn't said anything about the Tithes or the other humans yet."

The knot in my chest released slightly. That gave us a little more time for me to take the crown from Faolan before more of my people got hurt.

“However...” Morven cleared his throat. “It’s not good news. He may not have said anything official yet, but...he’s stopped punishing fae for breaking the Treaty.”

What?

My blood chilled, and I clasped my hands together in my lap, my fingers like ice. I didn’t like the Tithes, but the Treaty was the one thing keeping the humans who weren’t stolen away as fae servants safe in their lands.

“He’s no longer sending those who break the Treaty to the Folkwood?” King Lazul confirmed.

Morven nodded. “While I was at the Sky Court, several frost fae bragged of having hunted humans in the forest, and there were no repercussions.”

Pain lanced up my arm. I’d picked up a golden knife and had it clenched tightly in my hand.

“Let’s hope word of this has yet to spread to the other Courts,” Thorne murmured.

Morven shook his head as he took a long draft of ruby-red faerie wine. “Unfortunately, Faolan’s already paid one other Court a visit. One you’ll all find interesting.”

He paused, then smacked his lips.

“Which is...?” Queen Esolde drummed her fingers against the table.

“The Shadow Court.”

Thorne’s eyebrows shot up, and Vanna’s parents exchanged a glance. Several of the other metal fae royals began muttering to one another in lowered voices, their words hidden by the backdrop of clashing swords.

I bit down on my lip. I’d encountered the Shadow Court heir, Kage, during the Alder Trials. He’d died in the second Trial, out on the lake, after trying to kill me.

Even just the memory of the purple-eyed, horned fae sent goosebumps prickling along my arms.

And yet... I glanced between Thorne and Vanna. The metal princess’s lips had curved up, while a satisfied light shone behind Thorne’s eyes.

“I didn’t go with them,” Morven continued, piling meat onto the golden plate in front of him, “but I know he had a meeting with Queen Mallantha and the five shadow princes.”

“What’s the significance of a visit to the Shadow Court?” I asked.

“Some Shadow Court magic affects the mind,” Thorne explained. To my confusion, his eyes were still bright. “A select few have the power to bend

others to their will.”

“Like the power of the Alder Crown?”

“It’s similar,” Thorne said. “So if Faolan has paid them a visit, it may be that he’s recruiting their services...”

“...because the crown isn’t working for him,” I finished slowly.

A tingle ran down the back of my neck. With their mind magic, some of the shadow fae could force other Court Fae to bend the knee to Faolan with or without the crown.

So he could pretend in front of other fae that it was working...

“There was talk of Lonan and Draven attending the Sky Court.” Morven spoke through a mouthful of meat, waving a chicken leg around. He wiped his mouth with the back of his arm. “Before the new coronation.” He slapped one hand down on his massive thigh. “Seems to me like Faolan needs them there. To try to force the other heirs to bend the knee.”

“So it seems like Aster’s claim is true...” Queen Esolde murmured.

Low chatter joined the sound of sword against sword as everyone broke off into low, urgent conversations.

I shivered, something still bothering me. “The Shadow Court can force the other fae to obey them?” I queried. “Then why haven’t they tried to force their way into power before, without the need for the Alder Crown?”

Thorne exhaled slowly. “Little is known about the Shadow Court’s magic in the rest of Faerie. But from what we understand, their magic depends on proximity. They can’t dupe everyone, everywhere, for the entire length of a fae reign. They’re not *that* powerful.”

*Thank Folk.*

I nodded slowly. A lump formed in my throat.

From what Ren had told us in the Forest Court—that Faolan was hesitating to call the other fae royals back for a coronation—and now learning from Morven that he was visiting fae whose powers mimicked those of the Alder Crown... I was almost certain of it.

*Faolan can’t use the crown.*

And if Nythoss confirmed that the crown was Craft, that would mean Yoren was right, and I probably *could* use it myself...

“That’s not all.” Vanna leaned back in her chair, swilling her wine around her cup in a contemplative way. “There’s another reason Faolan might be visiting the Shadow Court. The wyverns.”

“Wyverns?” I sounded out the unfamiliar word.

“They’re a bit like dragons,” Vanna explained. “You can tell them apart because wyverns have two legs, not four, and they tend to be slightly smaller...but they’re just as ancient.”

King Lazul leaned forward over his plate of untouched food, his keen gaze not leaving me even for a moment. “There’s every possibility Faolan has questions for them about the crown. Just like you do for the dragons.”

I glanced at Thorne. Could Faolan have found out that the Alder Crown was Craft? If he had, he would be even more eager to kill me.

The sounds of clashing metal suddenly all fell silent, and we turned to where the soldiers had cleared a pathway through their line. A human in a russet-brown tunic stitched with gold stood in the gap, her dark hair in braids, her hands clasped before her.

A *Tithe servant*. My stomach knotted, and I couldn’t tear my eyes from her.

“I have a message for the royal family,” she announced in a steady voice, addressing the king and queen.

I gnawed at my lip. She seemed bizarrely comfortable standing in a line of fae warriors. And, unlike the Tithe humans at the Sky Court, her eyes were bright and clear. In fact, she was the picture of perfect health...

I slowly loosed a breath. Perhaps Thorne and Vanna hadn’t exaggerated when they’d told me that Tithe humans were treated differently in the Metal Court.

“We are among friends, Sarya.” Queen Esolde waved a hand clacking with glittering rings vaguely around the table. “You may share your message.”

Sarya nodded. “Nythoss has sent a reply.”

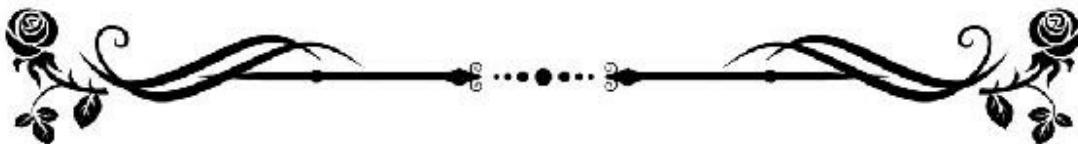
I couldn’t keep in a faint gasp.

The messenger shuffled her feet from side to side. “He says he has already had a request for an audience with the Metal Court fae this decade, and he does not appreciate receiving another so soon.” She bit her lip, her eyes darting from the king and queen to me. “But he heard that one of the petitioners is human.”

I swallowed hard, my mouth dry.

“Nythoss has agreed to see her. He’ll receive her plea next week,” the messenger continued, “but he promises nothing more than that.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



VANNA WAVED UP AT US, the metal princess growing smaller and smaller as the pulley system lifted Thorne and me up the sheer rock face. My stomach lurched as the wooden planks swayed beneath our feet, the cranking of gears and rattling of chains filling my ears.

The servant who'd brought us the message from Nythoss—Sarya—stood next to us, unperturbed. Similar pulley systems lined all of the rocky walls here, some in use by other servants. Using the rickety wooden planks to get around the forges must be a daily occurrence for them.

“Couldn’t you just shadow us up there instead?” I whispered, turning to Thorne. This lurching movement was reminding me of the first Trial, when we had winched the treasure chest up a sheer cliff face. With me sitting on top of it.

Thorne raised a brow. “*Asking* to be shadowed. That’s a first.”

“It’s the lesser of two evils,” I replied tartly.

The platform swayed, knocking against the wall and sending me lurching forward into Thorne, my hands pressed against his chest.

He caught me by the elbows, then hastily righted me before withdrawing.

I frowned. After the looks he’d given me at the dinner with Morven, I’d been sure Thorne would come to my room. When he hadn’t, I’d figured he’d seek me out *some* time.

But it had been a week since dinner, and I still hadn’t seen him in my chambers once after I’d retired for bed.

I wasn’t even sure why we’d been given separate chambers at all, not now that we were engaged. The fae were hardly known to be prudish—and yet the Forest Court had done the same.

“Unfortunately, Vanna warned me against using my powers,” Thorne replied, interrupting my thoughts. “The dragon doesn’t like the use of fae magic in his smithy. So we’re stuck coming up the human way.” He braced his hands on the platform railings. “Humans designed this system, so I don’t know what you’re complaining about anyway, petal. You should be in your element.”

“Humans aren’t made to be high up,” I huffed, focusing on the distant rocks and caves above us and not what was down below. My first experience of heights had been in the Sky Court, where I’d made the delightful discovery that they made me want to throw up.

The air grew warmer the higher we got, sweat jeweling across my collarbones. I was grateful I’d decided to wear the floaty, cherry-red gown Ferne had given me rather than one of the woolen human dresses I had packed.

“We’re here,” Sarya announced as the platform grated to a halt.

I turned around. Now *this* felt like we were truly inside a mountain.

We stepped out into a world of jagged, exposed rock and hanging stalactites, not a flash of gold or gleam of polished stone to be seen. But rather than feeling damp, the air was dry, a warm breeze brushing over my skin like a hot breath.

We followed Sarya through caves and tunnels that twisted around like a root network, lit by flaming torches. Many of the walls sparkled with uncut crystals, and one even glittered like gold, although Sarya told us that this particularly glittery rock was worthless—a trick, for fools.

When the tunnels opened up into a vast cavern, I caught a glimpse of distant dragons launching themselves from higher cave mouths, flying toward rare slivers of daylight.

My stomach flipped as they arced and soared, their silhouettes flashing dark against the bright outside world. From this distance, I might have taken them for a bird of prey if it weren’t for the distinctive, bat-like shape of their wings.

How big would Nythoss be? And how close would I have to get to give him the gift tucked into my pocket?

Other humans passed us, some carrying water or weapons, others pushing carts filled with rattling rocks. I watched all of them keenly for any sign that they seemed unhappy, but their movements were relaxed, many of them chatting and laughing as they worked. They seemed completely unbothered

by the distant dragons.

My cheeks heated as their eyes ran over me but lingered on Thorne.

“Fae don’t usually come up here,” Sarya explained after two girls stopped in their tracks to watch Thorne pass.

“And there I was thinking it was just my good looks,” Thorne replied, unruffled.

I rolled my eyes but didn’t comment.

Eventually, we stopped outside a huge cave mouth that glowed from within. I took a step back at the wash of staggering heat. I felt like I couldn’t get enough air in my lungs.

“This is it,” Sarya announced. “Only Aster can go beyond this point.”

“If you think I’m about to let my—” Thorne snapped, then caught himself, continuing more coolly. “I’m not going to let Aster face an ancient dragon alone.”

“Nythoss only accepted an audience with Aster.” Sarya frowned.

I stepped between them.

“I’ll be fine,” I tried to reassure Thorne, although my voice came out a little breathless at the prospect of standing face-to-face with an ancient dragon on my own. There were no plants here to help me, and the only enchantment I’d brought with me was the gift I’d prepared last week.

I assumed Nythoss wouldn’t harm me, but I’d been counting on Thorne’s magic to shadow us out of there if things got...heated.

“I’ll call if I need help,” I promised him.

Thorne swallowed hard, his voice strained. “It might be too late. If I’m there, I can shadow you out in the blink of an eye.”

I pursed my lips. I had no idea what this dragon would be like. I didn’t want to anger him by bringing an unwanted guest, but equally, I’d feel safer with Thorne close by...

“Fine. But you’ll stay by the door and leave the talking to me.”

Thorne clasped his hands behind his back, a relieved smile crossing his face. “I’ll do my best to stay silent as a tongueless imp. That way, the dragon won’t even know I’m there.”

“Nythoss may be blind, but his other senses work just fine.” Sarya tapped her foot on the ground. “But if you want to go against the dragon’s wishes, then I’m not going to stop you. I’m just reminding you of what Nythoss agreed to.” She pointed inside the mouth of the tunnel to where the far end glowed like a sunset. “The forge is through there.”

We walked through the tunnel, shadows dancing along the wall. Sweat itched along my hairline, and when I turned to glance at Thorne, even his brow had a faint sheen, his cheeks slightly flushed.

The air thickened around us with the smell of molten metal, bitter coal, and other pungent scents that were new to me. All of them felt like they were singeing my insides with each inhale.

We stepped into an open cavern, and I blinked, barely taking in the vast forge surrounding us before a bright jet of fire roared across the room.

The heat forced me to stumble back, and I threw up an arm to protect my eyes from the blinding light.

The ground rumbled beneath my feet, the stifling air wrapping around me, sticking loose wisps of hair from my ponytail to the back of my neck. I shrank back until I bumped against Thorne's chest.

The flames seemed to go on forever.

Until, suddenly, the heat lessened, and I could finally breathe again.

I opened one watery eye. The jet of fire had stopped, and in its place glowed a vat of bright, molten metal.

Blinking rapidly, I looked up, my eyes still adjusting to the change in light.

What I had assumed was the back wall of the forge had *moved*.

My heart banged against my ribs as a huge, black dragon turned to face us.

The cavern that housed the forge was vast as a castle, yet the dragon almost filled it. His black body was covered with interlocking scales, the pattern visible along his throat and belly where the scales glowed orange at the edges like hot coals.

“Visitors...” His deep voice rumbled through the cavern, accented and impossibly ancient. It vibrated through my chest and hummed in my ears, lingering like the hiss of steam. “Who disrupts my morning labor, unannounced?”

*Visitors. Plural.* I held my breath. Sarya was right—Nythoss's other senses were perfectly fine.

Thorne looked as if he was about to step forward, putting himself between the dragon and me, but I held him back with an arm. “Greetings, Nythoss. I am Aster Wilden of Rosehill, an enchantress, greenwitch, and the rightful Queen of Faerie. I'm accompanied by Prince Thorne of the Forest Court.”

The dragon made a low, rumbling sound in his throat as he snaked his neck lower, toward us. Milky, unseeing eyes stared blankly out, unfocused...and yet his head swung between me and Thorne, as if he knew where we stood.

His hot breath stirred the hair around my face, reeking of ash and fire and death.

“I did not accept an audience with this impudent puck,” the dragon mused to himself, his voice as loud as the cracking of weathered wood. “It was the enchantress I agreed to parley with.”

“Please accept my apologies that I have not come alone,” I said quickly. “My betrothed can be...overprotective. He worries about me speaking alone with one as mighty as yourself.”

“*Overprotective?*” Thorne hissed, offended. “You agreed.”

I fanned away his protests, shushing him with a knowing look.

“Like an overbearing mother hen,” I added for good measure, addressing Nythoss.

The dragon let out a low growl in his throat that could have been a laugh. “Fae tend to be slaves to their base instincts. I suppose that’s what happens when one cannot Craft anything oneself.”

I cleared my throat. “Speaking of Craft, I have brought you a gift to thank you for agreeing to see me.” I removed the dish and stick of incense from my satchel and held them out, inching fractionally closer to the swelling heat of the dragon.

Nythoss sniffed the air. “Well, bring it closer then, enchantress.” His snout brushed the flat surface of a rock that looked to be part of his workspace.

I took a steady breath, then clambered up the rock, eyeing the lake of molten metal that bubbled to my left, the emanating heat like hands clawing at me. I carefully picked my way over to the flat rock Nythoss indicated, setting down the dish and affixing the stick of incense.

“It’s enchanted so that when you burn it, the smoke will create a vision in your mind’s eye and transport you to any place you desire.”

I’d tried to think about what gift a blind, cave-dwelling dragon might appreciate the most. What he could possibly need that would be worth more than the treasures he had easy access to.

I climbed back down as Nythoss leaned toward my gift, inspecting it.

Once I was back on the ground, I turned to see he had already lit the

incense and was inhaling the dark-purple smoke that curled through the air.

Lids shuttered across the dragon's milky eyes, and he let out a rattling, deflating sound that reminded me of a cat's purr.

Thorne and I exchanged a glance, then waited in silence.

After several long minutes, the last of the smoke stopped spiraling from the incense, and the dragon cracked an eye open, turning back to us. He snaked his head so close I could see every craggy scale and spine and sharp fang.

I cringed as hot, rancid breath rippled across my face.

"This was a satisfactory gift, enchantress," he said. "You may ask one question."

The dragon shifted back slightly, and the tension tightening my body loosened.

I took a deep breath.

"I won the most recent Alder Trials," I said quickly. "I killed the Alder King, and yet another wears the crown."

Nythoss gave a low growl. "I do not need a lesson in current affairs, young enchantress. I do not care for fae politics."

"It's just to give you the background..." I trailed off, but Thorne nodded in encouragement. "The Enchanters' Guild told me that the Alder Crown is Craft—that it was made by an enchanter. I'd like to know whether that's true...and what else you know of it," I added hopefully.

The dragon thumped down to the ground, shaking the whole cavern. I staggered slightly.

"The Alder Crown was indeed made by enchanters." He breathed out a puff of smoke.

My heart lifted. Yoren hadn't lied to me. The Alder Crown was Craft—and that meant I was likely able to use it.

"But you ask the wrong question, young enchantress."

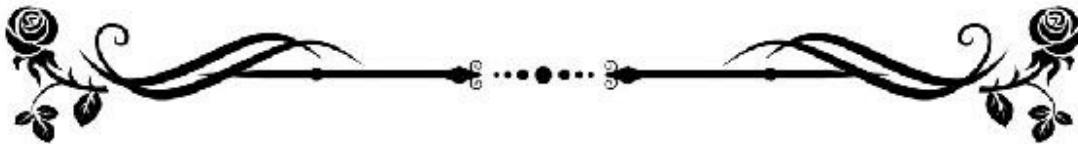
Despite the heat, my fingers grew cold. My brows knitted together. What had I missed?

"Then please," I asked slowly, "tell me what I need to be asking."

More gray-blue smoke billowed from the dragon's snout, the orange glow along his throat dulling.

"The crown is the most famous of the three items of power, the one the fae have always been most interested in, but it is certainly not the only one. I would expect a human enchantress to ask about the other two."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



THE BREATH SEEMED to have been knocked from my lungs all over again. I glanced at Thorne to find him wide-eyed, his gaze locked on the dragon. There was not an inch of recognition on his face.

“What do you mean,” I asked weakly, “when you say *other* items of power?”

The dragon lowered his head, a hiss of steam curling out between his teeth. “The human enchanters Crafted three items of power, known as the Alder Regalia. A crown, an orb, and a scepter.” Nythoss shifted, sending small stones skittering over the floor of the cavern. “One Crafted of bone, one of glass, and one of gold. Each is powerful in its own right, but used together, they are unstoppable.”

This new information whipped through me. I hadn’t asked anyone whether dragons could lie, but it didn’t seem possible that this could be true.

“Why has no one else told me of these items?” I said. “The Alder Regalia.” I tested the words on my tongue.

The dragon huffed. “Simple creatures that they are, the fae focused on the Alder Crown. Its power of persuasion grew as it absorbed the magic of each ruler, and it was the main tool a new fae monarch needed to ensure they would be obeyed. Soon the other two items of power were used for ceremonial purposes only, until their own powers were gradually forgotten.”

“So no one alive today knows about them?” Thorne spoke up.

The dragon bared his teeth but answered the question. “Few *fae* know about them, only those small groups appointed as the Regalia’s guardians. But *some* creatures live longer than a fae’s fleeting lifespan.”

“But the fae live for hundreds of years...” I protested.

“Dragons live for thousands,” Nythoss snapped back.

I swallowed, cautious of angering a creature with fire brimming in his belly. “You saw these items firsthand?” I tried hard to sound curious and not as incredulous as I felt.

“In dragon years, it was not that long ago, young enchantress. Although I appreciate that for your short, mayfly years, it may seem that way.”

I drew a breath. “And what do the other two items *do*?”

“The Alder Crown gives the king or queen the power to compel others. The Alder Orb gives them the power of farsight. And the Alder Scepter amplifies their existing magic.”

Thorne stepped to my side. The expression of shock had faded from his features, a calculating look sitting behind his narrowed eyes. “So if Aster had the other two items, that would give her enough power to win the crown from Faolan?”

The dragon tilted his head, reminding me of a hawk sizing up its prey. “If she has the scepter, another will not win against her in a battle of magic.”

“Even though I’m not fae?” I asked.

“You access magic through your enchantments, do you not?”

I nodded. So the crown would make my enchantments unstoppable. “Then the fae would finally have to accept me as queen,” I breathed.

Nythoss let out a low, rumbling chuckle. “I should like to see someone with real talent rule the Kingdom of Faerie. Someone with *Craft*. And I should like to see the fae bend the knee to a human queen... So if that is your goal, young enchantress, you should know that while the Alder Regalia may have been forgotten, any fae who comes face-to-face with one of the items of power will know at once what it is. They will be able to feel it in their blood, their magic. And, like the Alder Crown, the other regalia may only be wielded by the true King or Queen of Faerie.”

A thrill shivered down my arms. Perhaps there was a way I could beat Faolan without having to fight him for the crown, without ever having to face him or his Shadow Court recruits...

“How do I find the items?” I asked.

Nythoss opened his jaw in a terrifying yawn that exposed his yellowed fangs. “Have I not been generous already, young enchantress? I have already indulged you and answered far more than one question.”

I stuffed my hand into my pocket, removing a bunch of incense sticks. “That’s why I have made more than one enchantment.”

A lid swept across the dragon's milky eye, and then he let out another rumbling laugh. "As I said, I should very much like to see a ruler with Craft sitting upon the throne..." Nythoss nodded his head, and I moved to set the other incense sticks down on a rock.

"The scepter and the orb have not surfaced for many thousands of years. Even I do not know where the scepter is held. But, of course, if you retrieve the orb and use its gift of farsight, you will be able to find it."

"And where *is* the orb?" Thorne asked impatiently.

The dragon's eye fixed upon him, a warm light building in his chest, and Thorne hastily stepped back, hands held aloft.

Nythoss returned his attention to me. "The orb was Crafted using sea glass. A select group of Sea Court fae know of it still. It is hidden in their Court, on an island summoned from the depths of the ocean to house such an invaluable treasure. The island is perfectly circular, just like the orb."

I swallowed thickly. Two items of power, one guarded somewhere on an island...another that could be anywhere.

Nythoss stood suddenly, the floor shuddering beneath our feet. The orange embers in his belly glowed back to life in dismissal. He was going back to work, which meant scalding flames were on their way.

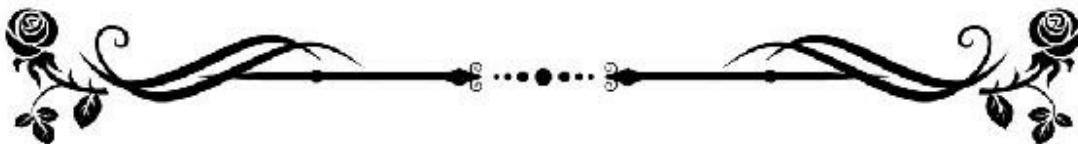
Thorne grabbed my arm, pulling me toward the door.

"Let's go, Aster." He eyed the dragon's smoldering throat, heat rippling the air and distorting my view of the huge beast.

"Thank you, Nythoss," I called out.

The dragon swung his head our way, his terrible lips parting in something resembling a smile. "If you are the true Queen of Faerie, as you claim to be, the items of power will call to you." Black smoke billowed from his mouth and nostrils. "If you do not hear the call, then you do not deserve them, for you are not the true queen."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



“HOW DID IT GO?” Vanna called up as the pulley creaked and juddered down the rock face, lowering us back to where she waited. Morven had joined her and stood at her side, inexplicably holding a large axe in one hand.

“You both look rough,” he observed as we came into his line of sight.

I glanced at Thorne, who still looked perfectly composed to my eyes. I reached a hand to my hair. Damp curls had stuck to the back of my neck, and several wisps had escaped my ponytail, limp from the heat. No doubt my dress was patchy with sweat.

“Did Nythoss tell you what you needed to know about the crown?” Vanna asked, ignoring Morven.

In spite of the exhaustion flooding through me after the tension of facing a dragon, my lips curved up. “Yoren didn’t lie,” I called down to them. “The crown was made by human Craft.”

Vanna inhaled sharply just as Morven let out a low whistle.

The platform hit the ground, and relief flooded through me as Sarya let us out. “But that’s not all he told us.”

Vanna and Morven exchanged a glance, and excitement buzzed through me. It was probably the leftover adrenaline coursing through my veins, but I suddenly wanted to run, to move.

“We’re going to need a map of the Kingdom.” Thorne stepped delicately off the platform, keeping close behind me.

Vanna gave a sharp nod of her head. “Come on. You can explain on the way.”

She led us briskly out through the hewn stone corridors, back to where metal swirled over everything, chandeliers cast a dappled light over the

shining floors, and Little Folk scurried about with rags and polish. She kept a perfectly straight face as we explained what Nythoss had told us about the Alder Regalia, interrupted only by irritation that crossed her expression each time Morven let out another long whistle at our revelations.

“Here’s the map room,” Vanna announced at last.

I stepped through the doorway and stopped immediately, Thorne banging straight into the back of me.

I didn’t have the breath to apologize.

When Vanna had said map room, I’d imagined the kind of study I’d seen at the Forest Court, or perhaps some sort of library. But no, this was a cavernous hall, the entire floor covered in a detailed mosaic of precious metals and gemstones, each tile building up a gleaming picture of the Kingdom of Faerie.

I stepped farther in, my eyes raking the bejeweled world spread before me. We’d entered the room from the north of the map, the white expanse of the Frost Court covered in glittering swaths of crystals and diamonds, creamy pearls, and palest aquamarine.

“Vanna, this is...” My mouth hung open.

“Over the top?” Thorne offered, a half-smirk lifting the corners of his lips.

Vanna swatted him. “Every Court has one. I’ve seen your living map at the Forest Court. This is just...our interpretation.”

Thorne snorted. “Vee, this is made from *jewels*.”

“If you hadn’t noticed, we like jewels here.” She bustled past him.

At least they seemed back to normal.

“I think it’s nice,” Morven said loyally. “Shiny.” He had made a beeline for his own Mountain Court and was admiring the rich gold and metal alloys that made up the tiles of his home.

While I was glad everyone seemed to be getting along, I was more concerned with making a plan. At any moment, Faolan could officially repeal the Treaty, and then not only the enchanters but *all* humans would be in danger.

If they weren’t already, since Morven had said no one was being punished for disobeying the rules.

“Nythoss said the orb is kept on a perfectly round island.” I looked toward the sea, a rich patchwork of blue sapphires and polished turquoise that hugged one side of the room.

“And you don’t know where the other item is? The scepter?” Vanna’s gaze scanned the rest of the lands.

I shook my head. “No, but Nythoss said we should be able to find it using the orb. Using *farsight*.” I sounded out the word. “I’m guessing that means it involves visions of some kind?”

“I’d guess so,” Thorne agreed.

“Sounds useless,” Morven grunted, patting the axe he had now slung over his shoulder. “A weapon like the scepter would have been much better.”

“Well, as I just explained, we can use the orb to *find* the scepter.” Starting at the top of the coastline, I walked slowly over the mosaic floor.

Vanna had started from the bottom of the coast and was walking toward me. “There are hundreds of islands,” she complained with a frown. “How are we supposed to find the right one?”

“How accurate is your shiny map?” Morven asked. “Maybe we’d be better off with a normal-size one. Y’know, on paper.”

“You know perfectly well the Court maps are entirely accurate,” Vanna snapped, the apples of her cheeks turning pink.

I looked around, waiting for Thorne’s input, but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Thorne?” I called out, my gaze catching on a slight mist of shadows that lingered where he’d been standing just seconds ago.

“Up here, petal.”

I looked up to a second-floor gallery I hadn’t even noticed. Thorne leaned over the edge of the balustrade. “I thought this would give me a better viewpoint.”

“And did it?” Vanna planted her hands on her hips.

At a flourish of Thorne’s hands, the flames in the lanterns lining the room rose higher, chasing away the dark. He cupped his chin in his palm, looking down. His fae eyesight probably made it no different from studying a map right beneath his nose.

“The only perfectly circular island is that one, there.” Thorne pointed to the middle of the coastline, and Vanna and I hurried forward.

The island was tiny, barely the size of a copper coin on this huge map.

“It’s not too far from shore,” observed Vanna.

Thorne shadowed to my side, and we all crowded around the tiny island encircled by our feet.

“Can you shadow me there?” I asked.

Thorne shook his head. “I can’t shadow beyond the mainland. That’s probably one of the reasons why the Sea Court guardians originally put the orb on one of their islands. To keep it away from the Shadow Court.”

Morven folded his arms, his face serious. “If you can’t shadow in, that’s a problem. The Sea Court and River Court have cut themselves off from the rest of the fae. They’re angry at what happened to Nerida in the Alder Trials.”

My ears pricked. “Really?”

The river princess hadn’t even survived the first Trial. The frost princess, Neve, had launched a frozen spear at her team while they were scaling the cliff face, and Nerida had been crushed beneath the falling iron chest.

But my experience with the fae was that they were blasé about death. Especially deaths that occurred in games as deadly as the Alder Trials.

“The two Courts are close,” Vanna explained, tapping her foot where the mouth of a shining topaz river spilled into the sea. “They always have been, but Nerida and Sereia’s relationship brought them even closer together...and when Princess Sereia reported how Nerida died....”

“It wasn’t a warrior’s death.” Morven shook his head. “It was a cheap move of Neve’s. Nerida didn’t even have the opportunity to fight back.”

“Worse, Faolan didn’t release her body quickly enough for their traditional water burial,” Vanna added. “They believe her soul will never find rest.”

I chewed on my lip. “So they’re angry at Faolan?”

“They’re angry with *all* of the land-dwelling fae.” Morven clapped his hands together. “It’s exacerbated some...tensions that were already there. And let’s not forget, we were on the team that benefited from Nerida’s death, even though it was Neve who killed her.”

“I wasn’t,” Vanna murmured. “But I couldn’t help her.”

Morven scrubbed a hand over his chin. “I can put together a battalion of soldiers to fight the Sea Court. We’ll need ships, though, and—”

“No,” I shook my head. “This plan has to be about stealth. I don’t want to start a war. I just want to stop the Tithes.”

“We don’t want to draw any attention to what we’re doing,” Thorne agreed. “If Faolan hasn’t heard about the Alder Regalia from the Shadow Court wyverns, we don’t want to alert him to our presence. We can’t risk him discovering Aster’s whereabouts.” He cleared his throat. “Aster and I will go alone. I can shadow us to the coast, we’ll find a boat, and we’ll retrieve the orb.”

“But what if the Sea Court—” Morven began.

“We can hold our own.”

I looked slowly between the two fae princes.

“There’s no way you’re going without me.” Vanna crossed her arms. “I don’t doubt that you and Aster are a formidable team, Thorne, but you need to be practical. Who’s most likely to be able to charm someone into giving you a boat?” She tossed her hair over her shoulder. “I am. And you’re going to need a lookout while you search this island, unless you were planning on staying behind on the boat and letting Aster search for the orb herself.”

“And you’ll need muscle to help row the boat across.” Morven puffed out his chest, and Vanna shot him a surprised look. He met her gaze with a fierce look of his own. “What? You’re my betrothed.” He looked away. “Besides, I’m not letting you have all the fun. If there’s going to be a fight, I’m coming with you.”

“There won’t be any fighting,” I said quickly.

“There might be.” Morven looked eager at the prospect.

“And that’s your only reason?” Thorne took a step closer to Morven, his outline darkening with shadows. “Protecting your betrothed?”

“Vanna doesn’t need protection.” Morven said matter-of-factly. “She’s not as easily broken as a human—no offense, Aster.”

I held my hands up. “None taken.”

“I’m not questioning Vanna’s abilities,” Thorne challenged. “I’m questioning your loyalties.”

Instead of bristling, Morven shrugged. “Oh. Fair enough. I’m not working for Faolan, if that’s what you’re worried about. I want Aster to take the crown.” His words had Thorne’s shoulders lowering a fraction. “She may be human, but she’s a braver fighter than that straw-haired windbag.”

Had Thorne been suspicious of Morven’s intentions this whole time?

*Probably.*

After Morven had said he believed I was the true Queen of Faerie at dinner the other night, I’d assumed he could be trusted. But Thorne was right to question him. Morven could believe that and still be working for Faolan. I should have been more wary.

Had I learned *nothing* about blindly trusting the fae?

Vanna gave Thorne a meaningful look. “If we come, that’ll be two more blades protecting Aster’s back.”

There was a pause.

“Fine,” Thorne muttered. “You can both come.”

I gazed at the floor, searching out the distance between the Sea Court on the western coast and the Metal Court to the north. Would shadowing such a great distance tire Thorne out?

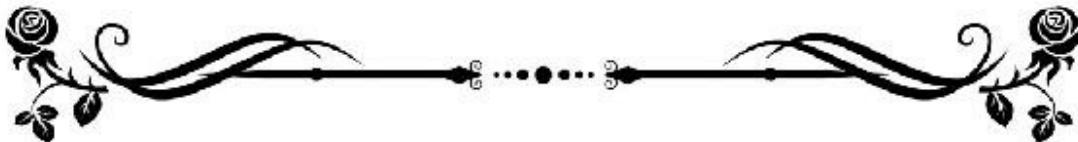
I knew better than to ask such a question, especially in front of Morven.

Instead, I addressed the group. “We should leave as soon as possible. If Faolan has visited the Shadow Court and spoken with the wyverns, there’s a possibility he knows about the Regalia, too.”

“As soon as we source a boat,” Vanna agreed, her eyes gleaming.

Thorne met her grin. “Let’s go find the Alder Orb.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY



MY STOMACH ROCKED as a wave of salt spray flew up over the side of the boat. Gulls cawed, circling above us in the drizzle.

I stood at the prow, focusing on the thin line of the horizon ahead of the choppy sea. We'd left early, boarding the boat in darkness, and now the first morning light crept through the clouds, illuminating the tops of the angry waves.

It was my first time seeing the sea. The never-ending stretch of water inexplicably reminded me of the Folkwood, the way the trees would ripple with strong winds. I would have much preferred to stay among the tall, shadowy pines along the coastal cliffs...but we had to brave the writhing waters to reach our destination.

“There—that’s it.” I pointed to a craggy silhouette that rose like a tower from the water.

*The island.*

It had been too dark to see it from shore, but now there was enough light to make it out.

The boat swayed to the left as Thorne adjusted our course.

“Is this really the only boat you could get?” Thorne grumbled at Vanna from one side of the boat, where he held his hand out over the water.

Vanna twisted in her seat underneath a wooden pavilion in the middle of the boat. “What’s wrong with it?”

“What’s *right* with it?” Thorne countered. “It’s a barge. Made for leisurely day trips along calm rivers. It’s barely seaworthy.”

As if to illustrate his point, the narrow vessel tilted precariously over a particularly large wave, and I clung to the side, my stomach lurching and my

fingernails scraping against the damp wood.

Vanna made a vague gesture with her hand. “It floats, doesn’t it? Besides, Aster and Morven aren’t complaining.”

I wasn’t...but my experience with boats began with the rowing boat at the Cursed Court and ended with the sailboat in the second Trial. I had no idea if this boat was unusual or not with its long, flat bottom and low sides.

Either way, with Thorne’s Sea Court and River Court magic propelling us forward, we would be able to sail any boat through these choppy waters.

My gaze found Morven. He’d been unusually quiet for the last quarter hour. At Thorne’s instruction, he sat perfectly center, the anchor wrapped in his clutches to help keep the boat balanced.

When we’d boarded, he’d barely been able to keep his booming voice down to a whisper, but now, in the anemic morning light, the Mountain Court prince was uncharacteristically silent and very, very pale.

I guessed he liked sailing even less than I did.

Vanna moved from her seat to stand beside me, gliding smoothly across the boat despite the wet planks swaying beneath her feet and the full golden armor she wore.

She leaned against the side of the boat next to me, looking out to sea.

“You’d better not fall in wearing all that.” I tapped the plate on her arm.

Vanna stared toward the island. “If I fall in, drowning will be the least of my worries.”

I gave a dark laugh, then stopped, realizing she couldn’t lie.

“If any of us touch the water,” she explained, “the Sea Court will know we’re here.”

I swallowed, my gaze searching the water for any sign of the fae. “But being on boats is okay?”

“They generally leave boats alone. It’s beneath the waves that’s their domain.” She hummed. “Although they’ve been known to lure ships into rocks. Then the wrecks become theirs.”

I thought about this for a moment, shivering as I imagined the dark, wet world beneath the water. “So the island isn’t Sea Court territory? They won’t know if we step foot on it?”

“It’s surrounded by Sea Court waters, but no, it doesn’t belong to them.”

I licked my chapped lips, tasting salt. “What will they do if they find out we’re here?”

“I don’t know,” Vanna said grimly, “but it won’t be pretty. The Sea Court

doesn't take kindly to trespassers at the best of times, and I can't imagine their hospitality has improved since they've cut themselves off from the rest of the fae."

I studied the dark, gray waves in the pale light, whipped with froth. What Sea Court creatures lurked in the depths? Kelpies? Tentacled monsters?

Sereia had been as beautiful as any of the other Court Fae with her long, red hair, but I shuddered at the thought of her angry, grief-stricken face glaring up at me through the waves.

"Rocks to your right," Vanna called over her shoulder to Thorne, and the barge changed course again, rising and falling with the waves. "It's even rockier the closer we get," she murmured to me.

I squinted toward the island. The rocks surrounding it were invisible to my human eyes in the dim light and lingering mist and rain, but I didn't doubt Vanna's keen fae eyesight.

A shadow flitted across the waves at the prow, and I looked up, wondering if it could be the reflection of a gull or a fast-moving cloud.

But the clouds were thick above us, the only break the sunrise glowing on the distant horizon.

"What's wrong?" Vanna asked, noticing my gaze darting from sea to sky.

"Nothing." I shook my head. "I thought I saw something. It was probably a fish."

Vanna gripped the edge of the barge, her golden eyes sharp as she leaned over the side.

"How big was it?" she asked.

"I... I couldn't tell." The shadow had only been there for a second, and now I was doubting I'd even seen anything.

*Thud.*

Something hit the bottom of the boat.

Vanna raked the waves with her gaze, while I turned, looking for Thorne.

"A rock?" His low voice carried to us on the wind like he was standing right beside us.

I shook my head.

Vanna studied the sea around us in silence, poised like a spear ready to strike. I watched the churning water with her, running my hands nervously along my damp braid. We stayed like this for a few more minutes, but there were no more shadows, no more thumps against the boat.

"It must have been a rock," Vanna declared at last. Her shoulders dropped

slightly, her grip loosening on the side of the boat.

Even I began to notice the rocks now, dark gray against the silvery surface of the water. They were oddly shaped in that they were almost perfect hexagons, the columns fitting together like tiles Crafted by human hand.

Vanna turned back to Thorne. “The rocks get bad up ahead. You’ll need to take the rowboat from here.”

Thorne’s magic immediately stopped propelling us forward, the slap of the waves against the boat quieting.

“Morven? The anchor?” Vanna moved to the mountain prince’s side.

The huge fae stood slowly, moving to deposit the anchor over the edge of the barge, while I helped Vanna and Thorne ready the smaller wooden rowing boat.

As Thorne and I clambered in, my satchel swung against my side, the jars of my enchantments clanking against one another within it. I hugged it close to my middle as I settled into the much smaller boat, the movement of the waves all the more pronounced. I hoped the Sea Court wouldn’t realize we were here...but I’d be ready to defend myself if they were.

Morven’s whispered complaints floated after us. He wanted to come to dry land with us, but there was no room in this tiny rowboat for anyone other than Thorne and me.

The Mountain Court fae gave a miserable wave as Thorne began to move the smaller boat away from the barge, toward the island. I waved back, then took a deep breath, turning my attention to the fae opposite me.

Thorne’s dark hair was tousled by the wind, his pine-green shirt open, the damp material clinging to the planes of his chest. The oars remained untouched on the bottom of the boat as he instead held a palm over the side, creating a current that pushed us forward. His gaze only strayed from me to check our bearing. He looked a little drawn and pale.

“Are you all right?” I nudged the oars with my toe. “I can row if you’re getting tired.”

Thorne laughed, then his face softened when he realized my offer was genuine. “Thank you, petal, but it’ll take more than this to tire me out.”

“You already had to shadow us all here,” I pointed out.

Thorne’s magic might seem all-powerful, but he was still just one fae.

“I promise I’ll tell you if I’m getting tired.” He smiled in a way that bared his canines, a smile that used to make me want to run away. Instead, my heart flipped.

We were getting close to the island now, its shadow blocking out the rising sun and making everything darker than ever. I had no idea where we would land the boat when the sides of the island were sheer rock.

Waves dashed against the boat. The closer we got, the more it felt like we were being watched—that someone was listening. I swallowed the words in my throat. Even a whisper felt too loud now we were this close.

Thorne cocked his head, as if to ask if I was all right, and I nodded back, forcing a smile.

*Thud.*

The rowing boat tipped violently to one side, and a yelp left my lips.

*Thud. Thud. Thud.*

The boat rocked back and forth, the water frothing and churning around us.

This time, I glimpsed something scaled.

“Aster, keep to the center. Hold on to the bench—” Thorne’s words were cut off with a growl as a white arm broke from the wave and long fingers curled around his extended wrist.

I stifled a cry of horror with my hands. Had the Sea Court found us so soon? We’d been so careful not to touch the water. “What is that?”

“Merfolk,” Thorne replied through gritted teeth.

More pale hands gripped the edge of the boat, black talons slick and gleaming.

“Ourss...” A sweet, hissing voice sent all the hairs rising along the back of my neck. “One of ours.”

“Swim with us.” Nails scraped against the wood of the boat, sending it rocking wildly. “Come play beneath the waves.”

More and more voices joined the chorus as the boat tossed and leaped over the waves.

“Ours.”

“Dive in, little sea prince.”

“Come join us.”

“Ours.”

Female faces appeared at the edge of the boat as the merfolk pulled themselves up. I got a glimpse of long, wet hair plastered close to their scalps, followed by large, black eyes and sharp teeth.

Their faces were beautiful but alien. Scales dissolved into bare skin, long straggles of hair and seaweed covering their breasts.

“Keep back,” Thorne threatened in a low voice, a mist of shadows rising from him. His teeth were gritted, the muscles at his neck straining.

They ran webbed fingers through his hair, tugging open his shirt, trying to pull him backward over the edge of the boat. Thorne held on tight with one hand, prying away their vise-like grips with the other.

“I’m not of the Sea Court.” His voice was strained.

“You have our magic,” they insisted.

I couldn’t tell who was speaking, their soft voices lapping against each other like waves, forming a chiming chorus. The rowboat dipped lower at Thorne’s end with so many roving hands groping him and dragging him down.

Waves began to flow into the boat, soaking our legs.

“Come play with us,” the voices wheedled, followed by a soft, raspy sound that could have been a giggle.

“Leave him alone,” I shouted as loud as I dared, grabbing one of the oars and standing up, brandishing it with two hands like a longsword. They ignored me, so I hit out at the white arms that roamed within his shirt.

“No, Aster—” Thorne looked panicked that I was drawing attention to myself.

Black eyes swiveled to me, the merfolk letting out violent hisses of outrage.

“He is ours,” they spat at me.

“He is *not* yours,” I countered, thwacking at the knuckles that gripped the edge of the rowing boat. A surge of anger blossomed in my stomach.

“If you lay a finger on her....” Thorne’s voice rumbled. But I was more concerned with all of the nimble fingers roving over him.

I held the oar aloft, poised to strike. “We’re not here to play with you. We’re here to visit the island.”

The hands paused their groping, and I tightened my grip on the oar.

“The island?” the voices hissed as one again.

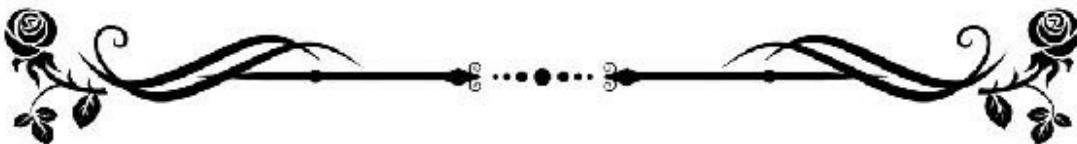
They all suddenly let go of the boat.

It sprang up, and I staggered back with a cry, my knees buckling as they hit the bench.

Thorne lurched toward me, but it was too late.

I toppled over the edge.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



MY EYES SNAPPED OPEN. A strained, painful gasp burned through my lungs as I sat upright, retching and coughing. Saltwater dribbled from my lips. I blinked, clearing my vision as a crowd of bodies came into focus, low murmurs all around me.

*The merfolk.*

Some stood and some crouched around me, their tails gone and their long, straggly hair plastered across their skin.

I was too weak to recoil, to do anything other than cough and splutter.

“Aster!” Thorne roared from a distance.

With a crunch of pebbles, the crowded merfolk parted to reveal him emerging out of the sea like a creature possessed, his shirt stuck to his chest, a stricken look on his face.

“Thank Folk.” He dropped to his knees at my side, clutching my cold hands between his and breathing heavily. “I thought you’d—” He broke off, his voice catching, “I thought I’d lost you.”

“How did I get here?” I croaked.

If Thorne hadn’t saved me... That meant...

“We brought you here,” the mer crouched closest to us murmured, her wet hair the pale blue of a duck egg, the tips of her elongated ears poking through her wet tresses.

“I dove in after you.” Thorne rubbed my back in reassuring circles, his hand warm through my cold, wet clothes. “But without my shadowing magic, the merfolk were quicker.”

He was still breathing heavily, his nostrils flared.

“We brought you to the island,” the same mer said.

I didn't know whether to be angry or grateful. These fae were the reason I'd ended up in the sea in the first place, but then they'd saved me and brought me to where I needed to be.

"Help me up." I reached my arms up, and Thorne stood, then pulled me to standing. My face and nose and throat still stung with each breath, the cold sea air raking claws along my sodden clothes.

Thorne snaked an arm around my shoulders, crushing me to him a little too hard. But I didn't have the breath to complain, and I wanted to be close to him and his heat.

I took stock of myself. From the churning in my stomach, I guessed I'd swallowed some seawater, but my lungs weren't burning. My satchel was still looped across my body, and while I was cold in my wet clothes, I wasn't numb or shaking like I had been when Thorne had rescued me from the lake in the second Trial.

"Those who seek the island seek the well." The blue-haired mer spoke softly, addressing Thorne.

"The well," the other merfolk chanted in an eerie chorus.

My brow pinched. Nythoss had said nothing about a well. Had we come to the wrong place? Thorne's heart beat a quick rhythm against my arm where I was pressed against him.

"We seek an orb, not a well," I explained.

"They are one and the same," the mer hissed. "We will take you there."

Thorne and I exchanged a glance. I gave a slight shrug and nod of my head. The merfolk had already saved my life and brought us here. If they wanted me dead, they'd had ample opportunity to drown me.

"Where is this well?" I asked.

All of the mer pointed to the top of the island, and I twisted, following their clawed fingers up the sheer rocks.

I reluctantly pulled away from Thorne, wringing the water from my braid. "Show us, then."

Six mer peeled away from their sisters, three leading us up the sheer stone steps chiseled into the wet rock ahead of us while three followed behind. They didn't seem unsteady on their newly appeared legs in the slightest.

My eyes trailed along the knobbled spine of the mer in front of me, her wet hair pouring like spilled ink to her backside.

I felt like I shouldn't be looking, but her bare body was right in front of me as we climbed up the hill, and my only other options were to look out to

sea or down at the pebble beach below. I swallowed. The beach was getting increasingly smaller as we made our way up the rocky steps.

Thorne didn't seem the least bit distracted as he was led up to the top of the island by six completely naked, beautiful, female fae. Instead, he kept as close to me as possible, his warmth radiating at my back. Annoyingly, his clothes already seemed to have dried, although whether that was due to his increased fae body heat or his Desert Court magic, I didn't know.

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to stop the shivers. My own wet clothes clung to me uncomfortably.

After a while, the steps climbed up into the sky, a cold wind curling around me as we reached the top.

I pressed my hands to my hips, my breath hot in my lungs. The top of the island was covered in flat stones, a smattering of grass pushing through. It was large, and perfectly circular, as the map had shown.

At the center stood a perfectly normal-looking stone well with a wooden roof.

The merfolk pointed in unison. "The well."

Thorne and I walked toward it. The sunrise glowed softly back toward land, above the trees. "They said the orb and the well were the same," I murmured. "Do you think it's inside?"

Thorne gave me a sidelong glance. "Can you sense it?"

I gave a slight shake of my head, trying to ignore the bite of worry.

Nythoss had said the true Queen of Faerie would be able to sense the Alder Regalia, but I felt nothing...

"What do I have to do?" I asked the merfolk, who trailed behind us in a perfect semi-circle.

The mer with long, blue hair blinked slowly, looking between Thorne and me. "You? Not him?"

"Me," I confirmed.

Her black eyes glittered. "Only the true King or Queen of Faerie can drink from the well and live."

I exhaled slowly. "So the water inside is poisonous?"

"Only the true King or Queen of Faerie can drink from the well and live," she repeated, to murmurs of agreement from the other merfolk.

I gnawed my lip as I moved to the well, pressing my hands against the cool, damp stone as I stared down into the inky blackness.

"I still can't sense it." My voice echoed into the depths.

Thorne's hand came to rest against my lower back. "Aster..." His voice was rough with worry. "You don't have to do this..."

I ignored him, biting down hard on my lower lip. It bothered me that I couldn't sense anything. When I'd been near the Alder Crown, I had heard those whispering voices, felt the brush of an ancient power that had made me sure it was speaking to me. Now, there was nothing at all.

But we'd known that getting our hands on the orb wouldn't be risk-free.

I steeled my shoulders. I'd competed in three bloodthirsty trials to win the crown. I'd killed a king. I could drink from a well to get the orb.

A rope hung from a pulley system on the side, and as I moved toward it, all of the merfolk took a step closer, their eyes glistening.

"That's it," the mer hissed in cooing voices, their excitement palpable.

Thorne shot them a suspicious look as he also stepped forward..

"I can do it," I murmured to Thorne. I had to do it by myself.

The rope was rough against my palms as I pulled at it, raising something from the depths that swayed and clanked against the sides of the well. It was heavy, but from the noises, it sounded wooden, not glass.

I heaved the bucket up to the lip of the well, my arms trembling slightly, icy water spilling from the bucket's sides and splashing my hands. I set it down on the side of the well and peered in.

My reflection stared back out of the ripples, the water crystal clear.

I couldn't see anything resembling an orb.

"Now you must drink," the mer spoke as one again.

I didn't look up from the water. "What happens if it doesn't work?"

"Then you will die," one of the mer replied solemnly.

"And we will take your body with us back to the depths," another added.

Thorne's hand found my shoulder, and when I looked up at him, his hazel eyes raged with emotion. His face had drained of color, his usually rosy lips pale and pressed into a line. "Aster, no—"

"You can't do this for me," I warned him, knowing what he was about to say.

"We'll find another way."

"This *is* the other way. We don't have the crown. So we need the other Alder Regalia to convince the other fae that I'm the rightful queen." I forced myself to take a breath, trying to convince myself as much as Thorne. "Without this, we don't have another option."

"We can challenge Faolan—"

“And what if the crown’s working for him? Visiting the Shadow Court, not calling the other Courts to bend the knee—it could all be a trap. You and I both know it. This is our best option.” I didn’t tear my eyes from his. “I have to at least... I have to *try*.”

“I can’t let you die.” Thorne’s voice caught in his throat.

“I won’t die.” Before I could change my mind, I scooped my hand into the bucket, icy water flooding into my palm.

But Thorne gripped my wrist before I could bring it to my mouth. “You don’t know that.” His voice was a whisper, and his hand trembled as it held mine.

“The merfolk said I’ll only die if I’m not the true Queen of Faerie,” I said sternly, “And they can’t lie. Now, you either believe my claim or you don’t. So which is it?”

Thorne let out a low breath. “Of course I believe you, Aster.”

“Then there is no danger to me.”

Thorne slowly let go of my wrist, his fingers trailing along my forearm. “Okay.” He forced himself to step back, his face tense. “I’m right here.”

My throat bobbed as I brought the water to my lips.

*I heard the whispers of the crown. I won the Alder Trials.*

Maybe I hadn’t won in the traditional way, but I had found a loophole. I knew I was the Queen of Faerie.

And this was our only option. If I wanted to stop the Tithes, if I wanted to give humans a say in laws that affected them, I *had* to fight for my claim to the throne before Faolan killed me first. And to stand a chance...I had to get the orb. If I didn’t have faith that I was queen, what hope did I have of asking the fae to believe in me?

A flutter of unease swirled in my stomach as the chilled liquid met my lips, and I took a small sip.

The water tasted metallic on the back of my tongue, swirled with the taste of magic.

I paused.

*Nothing.*

I took a larger gulp.

Thorne stroked my arm tentatively. “Aster?”

I turned to face the merfolk clustered close behind Thorne, their slim bodies slanted toward me in anticipation.

“I’m fine.” I wiped my wet hand against my shirt, the damp cloth doing

nothing to dry it.

When I looked up, my vision swam—then blurred. I let out a gasp.

I could no longer see the mer. I could no longer see *anything*. The sky, the ground—everything was a blur of indiscriminate color.

“Aster!” Thorne’s panicked voice cut through the chorus of chatter. I felt his hands at my waist, but his face had melted away. I turned and staggered away from him, the fronts of my legs banging against the well.

“My eyes.” I blinked rapidly, my voice rising a pitch. “I can’t see...” The words faded as I dropped my gaze back to the bucket before me.

*The bucket.*

My heart gave a jolt as I realized the bucket was still pin-sharp in detail, oddly sharper than it had been before.

I could make out every line of the grain of the dark wood, every knot and swirl. Inside, the water seemed to sparkle with life, the surface glittering as I pulled the bucket toward me, every tiny ripple a burst of rainbow colors.

And there was something else... Something that hadn’t been there before...

I plunged my hand back into the bucket, the limb a blur to me although I could still feel my fingers. They grasped around something smooth and slippery, pulling it out in a spray of droplets.

*The orb.*

I held it in two hands. It was made of the finest glass I’d ever seen, and the surface shimmered with greens and blues, like a bubble that could be popped.

I blinked as my vision returned to normal, the world beyond the orb and the pail coming back into focus.

I exhaled, suddenly realizing I’d been holding my breath.

“Aster, speak to me,” Thorne’s hands gripped my shoulders tightly, turning me to face him. “Please.”

“I got it.” I held up the orb. *I actually got it.* I suddenly felt weak at the knees.

“What happened to your eyes?” A muscle feathered along Thorne’s jaw, his expression still panicked.

“I couldn’t see,” I began, still mesmerized by the dainty bubble of glass in my hands. “Or, I could only see the pail, and the water, and then the orb.”

Perhaps that was what Nythoss meant by the Regalia calling to me. My gaze flicked from the orb to Thorne. “I got it. We got it.”

*Which means I'm the true Queen of Faerie...*

The whispers of doubt in the back of my mind quieted. Even though I was a human, the fae magic of the well had acknowledged me.

A giddy laugh of relief swelled in my chest.

“I can sense it,” Thorne murmured. “Its power. It’s different from the crown...but I can *feel* it.”

A smile broke out across my face. “This really is the Alder Orb...”

Thorne slipped his arms down to my waist, squeezing me to him and sweeping my feet off the ground completely. The sky glowed warmer, the sunlight slipping through the clouds.

“Careful of the orb,” I laughed, clutching it to my chest as he set me back down. “It looks breakable.”

Thorne looked down at me with an expression of awe on his face. Like I was the most wonderful thing in the world. His gaze dropped to my lips.

The blue-haired mer stepped forward, interrupting us. “It is yours. You have proved—”

A spray of something hot and dark splattered across my face as the mer shrieked, an arrow protruding from her chest. The others whirled and screeched, then scattered, taking running leaps from the island, diving into the sea far below.

My breath caught in my throat as I clutched the orb closer, Thorne’s arms tightening around me.

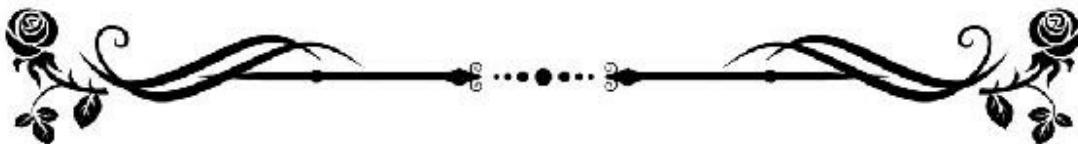
The blue-haired mer crumpled to the ground, her inky-blue blood pooling at my feet.

Winged figures appeared in the sky above the mainland, emerging from the sunrise that had disguised their glow.

My skin chilled. Even from this distance, I knew.

Faolan had arrived.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



THE HUM of vibrating wings surrounded us, the air shimmering like light skimming across water. Faolan's forces shone brighter than the sun, a dazzling, wicked, golden horde. My eyes narrowed. Blinding glimmers reflected off golden plates of armor, long, shining tresses, and glinting blades.

Almost a hundred sky fae, armed to the teeth.

I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat. We had come here on a reconnaissance mission. But Faolan had brought warriors, sent here for one very clear purpose.

To capture me.

Why else would he bring so many Court Fae with him, dressed for battle and clutching longbows, arrows fletched with bright-white feathers at their backs?

“Get behind me,” Thorne hissed. “I can’t shadow walk beyond the mainland, so I can’t get us out of here.”

I took a step backward, my knees weakening, although my fingers curled more tightly around the smooth glass orb.

I couldn’t spot Faolan among the shine of sky fae. Little Folk wheeled and soared through their midst, some like tiny glowing sunspots polishing the armor of the Sky Court soldiers, others like little puffs of cloud that flared blindingly bright, others still surrounded by hanging drops of rain, blurring the air so that it was difficult to see.

My attention snagged on one small, slight figure dashing between the others, the air crackling in her wake. She shot Thorne an evil grin, her pale hair rippling behind her, wild with static, loose volts trailing her arms down to her fingertips.

*Levina*. The faery messenger who had visited the Forest Court bearing Faolan's declaration against the enchanters. Who had threatened me.

I resisted the urge to take another step back, but fear trickled down my back. I had underestimated this small lightning faery before. How many others like her were in Faolan's army?

I tore my gaze from the skies back to the island—and my stomach hollowed out. The merfolk had all disappeared, leaving just Thorne and me on the island's summit. Our only possible allies had fled. Clearly they'd realized the futility of our situation, how impossible it was that a Court Fae, some merfolk, and a human could fight off trained soldiers.

Even if that human was Queen of Faerie...

Something twisted in my gut. Even proving that I was their true queen hadn't been enough to make the merfolk stand at my side and fight.

A rush of air behind me drew my attention, my head snapping around. Thorne's hair whipped around his head, his hands outstretched and muscles tense as he summoned a roaring wind, directing it at the hovering sky fae, blasting them away from us. The hum of their wings turned into an angry whine, growing louder and more insistent as their wings vibrated with the effort of fighting back.

A low rumble sounded overhead, and I shivered as the temperature suddenly fell, cold, fat drops of rain splattering around us.

But whose storm was this? Thorne's, or one of the other sky fae's?

Thorne didn't make a sound, his eyes narrowed, his lips thin as he lifted his hands higher. The only sign of his fury was the darkness in his eyes, the metallic scent of his magic, so strong that it stole my breath. I quivered beside the strength of it.

I swallowed again, something sticking in my throat. Thorne was powerful. He had magic like no other fae...but would it be enough? Could one fae and one enchantress stand against a hundred of Faolan's warriors?

“And there I was thinking you'd put up more of a fight.” A crisp voice came from between the soldiers.

*Faolan*.

He sparkled in gold armor that matched the rest of the Court Fae, but with a glittering golden cape rippling around his shoulders, lined with bright-white feathers. On each shoulder perched a gold swan fashioned to look like they were about to take flight, two wings spreading back toward his collarbones, long, elegant necks curving forward to end in savage beaks.

Craft like that could only be the work of human hands...

White-hot rage pooled in my stomach, snaking down my arms, up my neck. Without thinking about it, one hand went to my satchel, my fingers closing around a cool glass vial.

The bottled confusion I had made in the Forest Court.

I hurled it at the glittering sky prince, who was somehow even more dazzling than the rest of his army.

The glass spun, glinting, through the air—before catching in Thorne's tearing wind and zipping sideways, crashing into the breastplate of one of the Court Fae. The bottle smashed, spattering over the surrounding warriors.

They blinked rapidly, shaking their heads. Their wings slowed against Thorne's wind, and they were ripped away, down the sheer edges of the island and out of sight.

I snapped my head back to Faolan, who simply looked after the fallen warriors with idle curiosity. Thorne's magical wind continued to whip around us, lifting the ends of my heavy cloak, the stray strands of my hair, the sky fae beating their wings ever faster in an effort to remain stable in the air.

Faolan turned a sneering gaze back to Thorne. "Your human witch puts you to shame. With just one of her potions, she's dispatched more fae than you have with your magic. Still..." He displayed a line of perfect white teeth as he shot us a cold smile. "I think she proves my point about distrusting the enchanters..."

Thorne let out a snarl that sent shivers walking down my spine. "First, Faolan, if I wanted your soldiers dead, believe me—they would be." Abruptly, the wind stopped, and shouts of alarm sounded as soldiers crashed into one another, propelled forward by the frantic beat of their wings now that the wind had suddenly dropped. "As it happens, my priority is not to kill them, but to protect my queen."

He stepped back and inclined his head to me in the approximation of a bow.

Faolan's expression tightened.

"I hear the crown's not working so well for you, Faolan," I called up to him, my gaze traveling up to the bone crown sitting upon Faolan's brow.

I could still *feel* it, even though I was too far away to hear the whispering voices I'd heard when Thorne's father had worn the crown. It had something of Thorne's magic about it, a heaviness, a metallic taste that lined my tongue, that urged me to step closer, to reach out and touch it. I dragged my gaze

from the crown. A savage gleam lit Faolan's eyes—and they were fixed on me.

My heart skittered, and my grip tightened on the smooth glass.

His gaze dropped to the orb in my hands. "So what the wyverns said was true..." His brows knitted together. "The crown has two sisters... Much like the enchantress who wants to steal them all for herself."

"Only the true queen or king can use the Regalia." Only the slightest tremble of my voice betrayed my tangled emotions. "You'll never possess its power."

A slow smile cut across Faolan's face. He flicked something from his shoulder, then tilted his head to one side, regarding us pityingly. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, dizziness washing over me. Faolan would be able to use the Alder Regalia the moment he killed me.

"The Shadow Court wyverns told me of the other Alder Regalia," he said softly. "When I heard you'd visited the Metal Court dragons, I knew the Regalia would lure you out here... Now, Aster." His eyes flicked back to me. "I'd like you to come with me."

I jerked my chin up. "And why would I do that?"

Thorne let out a derisive laugh. "You really think Aster will go anywhere with you? You'll find, Faolan, that she's much more difficult to steal away when you haven't knocked her unconscious with pixie dust."

"Oh...but I think she'll come willingly." Faolan's eyes glittered as they met mine. "See, I'm about to offer you a bargain you won't want to refuse..."

Lifting a hand, he beckoned a group of fae warriors forward from the back of their shining pack.

A bowed, broken figure dangled between them.

My stomach dropped, my chest caving.

*Mosswhistle.*

The brownie hung unconscious from golden chains ending in iron manacles, its frail body limp between its Court Fae captors. The brownie's bark-like skin was rubbed raw at the wrists, burned and bloodied from the rub of the iron.

A strangled sob caught in my throat.

Its mossy tunic hung in tatters, revealing livid strips of scarlet, as if it had been whipped...

Faolan unsheathed a golden knife with a flourish. "Perhaps it won't upset

you to see the bark peeled from its skin like an apple..."

Thorne took a step forward, the tang of his magic rippling through the air as it built and built—but I thrust my arm out, holding him back.

"Don't!" I turned back to Faolan, my eyes darting between the shining golden prince and the limp, bloodied body at his side. "Don't hurt it...please."

A satisfied look settled over Faolan's features. "All you have to do to ensure the brownie's safety, Aster, is to come with me. I give you my word—and you of all people should know just how binding a bargain with me can be—if you come with me willingly now, I will let the brownie go."

Hot fear lanced through my body.

"Aster," Thorne said in a low, tight voice beside me. "If you agree to this bargain, you won't be *going* anywhere with Faolan. He'll kill you."

My blood pounded through my body. Faolan would try to kill me...but if I could just get a little closer to him, pretend to play along with his bargain, maybe I could get the crown from his head.

"You know," the sky prince continued, "we found the brownie helping the Tithe humans to flee the Sky Court. There were a few final stragglers, too old or too weak to hurry, and the brownie seemed oddly compelled to remain and help them. Of course, we had no use for slaves that had been tainted by whatever potions you'd fed them..."

An acrid taste burned the back of my throat. I snapped my eyes open, forcing myself to look at the fae who'd had no hesitation in slaughtering humans simply because they'd tried to escape from the hellish conditions the Sky Court had been keeping them in. Faolan's cruel gaze bored into mine. "Even when we burned it with iron, the brownie wouldn't tell us—"

"Enough!" I couldn't hear any more.

My mind whirred with all the enchantments I had in my satchel. I had some mushroom powder that would cause sleep, dried ivy leaves that would cause paralysis... Faolan would need to get close to me to kill me, and that would make him vulnerable to attack as well.

And Mosswhistle would be safe.

A risky plan took shape in my mind, and I made to step around Thorne. "Faolan," I called in a thin, high voice. "I—"

"No." Thorne grasped my upper arms. "I won't let you—"

"It's not your choice." I tried to break away from him, but he held me fast. I stared up into his face, desperation surging through my veins as I struggled against his firm grip. His eyes were bright and intense, a faint sheen

of sweat coating his brow. He looked half mad. “What’s gotten into you?” I hissed. “Let me go.”

Breaking away from him, I began striding quickly toward Faolan and the fae soldiers who were holding the brownie aloft.

A strangled yell came from behind me.

I spun on my heel, my heart in my throat as I whipped around.

A blur of dark fur erupted onto the top of the island from the same steps I’d climbed earlier—with Vanna astride it.

*Morven’s wolf form.*

They were both soaking wet. Vanna had shed her heavy armor, stripped down to just her fighting leathers. Had they swum here?

“Free the brownie,” Thorne roared, pointing at Mosswhistle.

Morven veered, the huge, muscled creature barrelling into the center of the ring of sky fae above us. The wolf’s fur bristled, lips pulled back to reveal a snarl of sharp teeth. In one smooth movement, Vanna sprang from his back like an acrobat, water droplets flying through the air.

Something glinted in her hand. She pulled her arm back, muscles bunching, and hurled a spear that cut through the air with a loud whistle.

A gasp swelled my chest as I tracked it—and it thudded into the chest of one of the fae holding Mosswhistle’s chains.

The fae crumpled, dropping from the sky—and Mosswhistle followed before swinging to the side as the remaining chains still held by the second warrior halted its fall.

The next instant, heat seared the right side of my face, and I flinched back as Thorne shot a brightly burning spiral of wind toward the other soldier.

The fae dissolved in the hungry flames, screaming, and the golden chains slipped from their hands.

“Mosswhistle!”

I heard my scream distantly. I raced forward, dropping the orb and holding my arms outstretched, ready to catch the brownie.

Its frail body crashed into my arms, the weight of it impossibly light, like I had caught an armful of leaves falling from a tree. I hugged the brownie to my chest. “I’m sorry,” I whispered through a blur of hot tears. “I’m sorry—”

Three fae bodies skidded to a halt beside me. Thorne, Vanna, and Morven, who had transformed back into his fae form. Vanna handed her betrothed a heavy longsword that had been strapped to her back before unsheathing twin blades hanging at her hips.

The three of them formed a protective ring around Mosswhistle and me, just a few feet away from Faolan's searing golden rage, their weapons held ready to fight.

"Th-the orb," I stammered out, my gaze raking the ground. "I—"

Thorne didn't tear his eyes from Faolan but jerked a hand up, the orb grasped between his fingers. "Got it," he said in a tight voice.

My shoulders sagged. "Thank Folk." I turned slowly back to Vanna and Morven. "Thank you," I said, injecting as much gratitude as I could into my voice. "Thank you for saving Mosswhistle."

Vanna's eyebrows shot up. "Hollow hills, Aster, we're here to save you."

"And a good thing we arrived when we did," Morven said in a low growl, swinging the hefty sword as easily as if it were a stick. The mountain prince's gaze swept the island, his eyes narrowing as he assessed the legion of fae surrounding us. "We've turned it into a fair fight."

I swallowed. Was four of us against all these Sky Court warriors really a fair fight? I realized I had no idea how much more powerful the fae heirs were than other Court Fae—whether Thorne's, Vanna's, and Morven's magic really counted for so much.

"Morven." Faolan's crisp voice rang out, irritation lacing his tone. "I have to say, I'm surprised to see you standing alongside this traitor to the crown...and the human girl who dares to call herself Queen of Faerie." He reached up and adjusted the Alder Crown, his sharp blue eyes never leaving the mountain prince.

Morven grunted, swinging his sword around to rest the flat of the blade against his shoulder. "From what I've been hearing, Faolan, that crown's not doing you a lot of good."

Thorne glared up into the sky. "How does it feel to be so impotent, Faolan?"

The sky prince's cheeks colored, his eyes flashing with rage. "The fact that you show so little respect for the crown is exactly why *you* could never win the Alder Trials, Thorne."

Thorne barked a laugh. "It's not the crown I have little respect for, Faolan, but the head it's sitting upon."

Faolan didn't respond, but another low crash of thunder sounded overhead.

Then a smile crept across his face. "Fortunately, there are plenty of *other* fae who recognize the crown's authority... I doubt you asked the Sea Court's

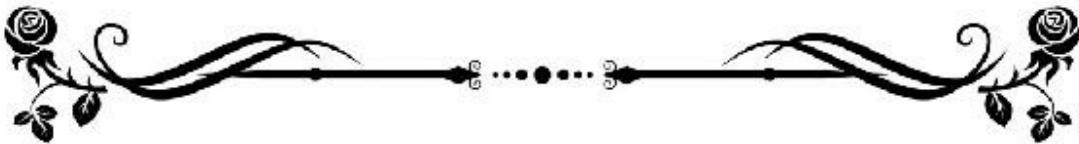
permission to cross their lands.”

His gaze slid to the precipice behind us. Thorne didn’t move from his protective stance, no doubt expecting a trap, but I couldn’t help it. I turned.

Pale, clawed fingers reached over the edge of the island’s plateau, fists bunched around tridents and weapons made of shell and driftwood.

The Sea Court.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



“THORNE...” My voice caught as I tugged him around to face the slew of sea fae crashing up and over the island’s precipice like a wave.

Dizziness washed over me. If we’d ever been capable of taking on Faolan’s battalion with the four of us...our enemy had just doubled. Against two Courts, we stood no chance.

My gaze tracked the approaching fae, Faolan’s hovering ring of golden warriors now surrounded by a circle of blue.

The sea fae were unlike any of the other Court Fae I’d encountered. They gave off that same subtle glow of impossible beauty that all the fae did—but theirs was the cool glow of light through water, a strangeness I’d only previously seen in the Little Folk.

Their skin was tinged palest blue, light, sparkling scales dancing over their shoulders, up their necks, over their cheekbones. There was something almost reptilian, a kind of sharpness, to their features. Like the other Court Fae I’d met, they sported pointed canines, but their eyebrows cut a sharp line up at the ends, an additional eyelid sweeping sideways across their irises, a thin webbing spread between their fingers.

Few Little Folk accompanied them—I guessed they couldn’t leave the water—but the merfolk had returned, hissing and spitting between the Sea Court Fae, clutching spears, cutlasses and wavy daggers between their long, sharp fingers.

“Greetings, gentlefolk,” Faolan said silkily. He swept into a bow before lifting his head and adding, “Princess Sereia.”

Sereia—the sea princess. I racked my brains for what I remembered of her from the Alder Trials. But I’d seen little of the sea heir. Her team had

been knocked out in the first Trial, and then she'd taken to her rooms, grieving Nerida, the dead river princess.

And Thorne, Morven, and I had been on the team who'd killed her...

A tall, willowy fae with long, red hair braided back from her face stepped forward. Pearls were strung through her damp tresses, while a pale-blue dress like floating seaweed clung to her lithe frame. She gripped a bronze trident taller than she was in one hand, and her chin was tilted, a bronze helmet adorned with leaping porpoises making her look savage, with the fierceness of a warrior.

I swallowed. Who was I kidding—there was no doubt she *was* a warrior.

And whatever her feelings about the Alder Trials, she'd clearly accepted Faolan as king. He'd looked pleased to see her, greeted her as an ally.

“Faolan,” she said in a voice that was full of music, like the swell and dance of a wave. Then, to my surprise, she turned her cool, ocean gaze onto us. “Thorne, Morven, Vanna.” Her eyes at last found me, and I found myself standing a little straighter. “Aster Wilden... To think, we all assumed you’d be killed in the first Trial.”

I flinched back, but I forced myself not to look away from those piercing aqua eyes. “I’m sorry that *anyone* was killed in that first Trial... Truly. It was a wasted life.”

For just a moment, something softened in the sea princess’s expression, the corners of her mouth flickering, her eyes shuttering.

Faolan cut in with a dismissive laugh. “Sereia, you know as well as I do that all humans have silver tongues. Let’s not waste any more of our time listening to this girl’s obvious lies.”

Sereia turned a lazy, insolent smile upon the sky prince. “Do I take that to mean you’re *not* sorry Nerida died, Faolan?”

A silence ripped across the island, like a sharply withdrawn breath.

Faolan went very still, a sudden, sorrowful expression creasing his face. “Any needless fae death is a tragedy, of course.”

Sereia tilted her head to one side. “You’ve always been clever with words, Faolan. But perhaps spending so little time among the water fae meant you never came to realize we’re just as slippery with our words as you are.” She leaned closer. “I hear everything you’re *not* saying.”

A muscle ticked in Faolan’s jaw. “I did not set the first Trial intending for any particular fae to die.”

*He’s evading the question.*

Hope blossomed in my chest. Of course, Faolan couldn't say he was sorry Nerida died if it wasn't true...and that might sway Sereia's loyalties...

I nudged Thorne with my elbow.

"Sereia." Thorne took a step forward, one hand going to his heart. "If you doubt Aster speaks truly—though I know she does—hear me when I speak plainly. I'm sorry that Nerida died. I regret her death deeply."

"And I." Vanna followed suit, hand on heart, head bowed.

After a beat, Morven did the same. "We all knew what the Alder Trials held in store for us, but Nerida was denied an honorable death. I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

Without hesitation, I mimicked their posture. "I know Faolan holds little regard for human words, but I speak the truth when I tell you that I'm heartbroken for you. I—I have two sisters at home. I couldn't live with myself if anything happened to them."

"Enough." Faolan waved a hand dismissively. "I care little for what invented human sentiment you wish to express, Aster Wilden. Only that you trespassed onto these lands in order to take an artifact that has long been in possession of the Sea Court."

Sereia ground the end of her trident into the rock. "And yet it is *you* who comes here with an army at your heels, Faolan." A thin, dangerous note crept into her tone.

Faolan drew in a smooth breath, brushing a hand along his sleeve. He stared down his nose at the gathered sea fae. "Unlike these traitors, I wear the Alder Crown. The Alder King may travel through whichever lands he wishes."

"Regardless," Sereia said in a sweet, chiming tone, "I don't appreciate troops invading Sea Court waters unannounced, no matter what claim to the crown they may—or may not—have."

My heart skipped higher again.

Faolan didn't move an inch, his jaw locked. "What are you saying, Sereia?"

She jerked her chin up, that savage light returning to her eyes. "I'm saying that I have an issue with *any* land fae trespassing into the waters of the Sea Court. And I think it's time you left."

The other water fae slithered forward, a scrape like sea over sand rushing through the air as they adjusted their stances, readying their weapons to attack on their princess's command.

The sky fae responded in kind, and I threw one hand to cover my eyes as hard glimmers of light reflected off their golden weapons. Bows were pulled taut, arrows fletched with pure-white feathers pointed at the Sea Court.

Thorne, Vanna, and Morven subtly shifted their positions, surrounding me. I pursed my lips, wanting to protest, but Thorne shot me a warning glance.

It was frustrating, but I understood. The three of them were likely to survive an arrow from the Sky Court, a slice from a Sea Court cutlass. I, with my soft human flesh, would not. And it wasn't just me I had to think about now.

My gaze dropped to the broken body of the brownie cradled in one of my arms, and rage made my body quiver.

Thorne reached back to hand me the orb, and my fingers slipped over the smooth surface. For a moment, I almost felt I couldn't see it properly, my vision blurring as the shining sea glass reflected the light of the Sky Court. I slipped it into my satchel and pulled Mosswhistle closer again.

"Stand down." Faolan's cold, tightly controlled words sounded pinched. But there was no questioning the command.

None of the soldiers moved, the air still as a held breath.

Faolan dropped from the sky, landing lightly on the island's rocky plateau, and took a step toward Sereia.

"I am your king," he said firmly. "You participated in the Alder Trials—you were there when I struck down Silvius. I wear the Alder Crown." He tapped the bone crown on his brow. "And, as your king, I'm telling you to *stand down*."

For a moment Sereia didn't respond. The sea princess stood stiff-backed, her chin still tilted defiantly, her shoulders set. But from the fact she hadn't replied right away, I knew she was considering Faolan's order.

"Make her!" The words erupted from my lips. I elbowed my way out between Thorne and Vanna, Mosswhistle still in my arms as I turned my gaze onto Faolan.

I wet my lips. Morven had said the crown wasn't working for Faolan. Everything suggested it wasn't. Faolan hadn't used it on Thorne or Vanna or Morven...

It was a gamble, but this would give us the confirmation we needed, one way or the other.

Slowly, the sea princess turned her head toward me. I felt her attention

like the brush of a sea breeze, and there was a catch in the air, as though the waves surrounding the island had halted, waiting for her command.

I took a shallow breath. “If you’re the true king, why not *use* that crown on your head and make her stand down?”

My words rang hollow around the gathered fae. Still none of the soldiers moved.

The faintest pink flush tinged Faolan’s cheeks. “I don’t have—”

“Yes, Faolan.” Sereia shifted, one hand going to her hip, the other spinning her trident like a baton. She slammed the end into the ground. The pretty smile she shot the sky prince sent shudders of fear running through me. “There are just so many rumors flying around these days. So many different accounts, so many claims to the throne. It’s hard to keep track of who is king or queen.” Her gaze traveled higher, to the bone crown sitting upon his head. “But while we’re on the matter of rumors, there are some I have heard closer to home...” Slowly, she turned back to me. “Don’t think I didn’t see what you just put in that satchel, Aster Wilden,” she hissed.

I hastily took a step back again.

Thorne moved to stand beside me, one hand flying out toward the sky prince. “What a shame, Faolan, that you didn’t bring your Shadow Court cronies to do your dirty work for you.”

“He’s working with the Shadow Court?” Sereia asked sharply, her gaze tearing away from me again.

A low grumble sounded from Morven. “Since the crown on his head is as useless as old bone to him, he’s had to summon fae with skills that make up for it. Those rumors stem from *my* Court, Sereia, and they’re all true.”

Vanna stepped closer to her betrothed. “Aster has a point, doesn’t she, Sereia?” She stretched a hand out, examining her nails, rings twinkling on every finger. “If Faolan wants to prove he’s the true King of Faerie, all he has to do is make you stand down.”

Sereia turned back, just as Faolan leaped off the ground, wings a blur as he shot into the sky.

The sea princess’s face set. “After them!” she roared, gesturing with her trident.

The Sea Court surged forward to the blare of horns and watery gurgles.

I realized some of the Little Folk had raised conch shells to their lips and were blowing into them. The Sea Court call to battle.

The waves crashing against rock roared louder, and I startled as I realized

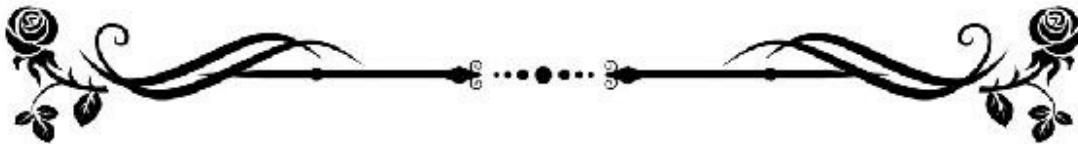
the sea had risen impossibly high. Where once this island had jutted proudly out of the ocean, the sea now looked ready to swallow it back again. A terrifying wall of water surrounded us, held back from engulfing the island, I assumed by Sea Court magic.

But the Sky Court didn't stay and fight. They fled after Faolan, disappearing into the sky until all we could see were lights like sunspots against the heavy gray cloud overhead.

The Sea Court slowed their attack, and Thorne let out a sigh, dusting his hands together. "Well, that's Faolan dealt with," he said crisply—then stopped as the Sea Court turned back toward us.

They hadn't lowered their weapons.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



MY HEART SKITTERED as the points of spears and curve of cutlasses swung toward us, the waves rising higher and higher around the small island. I slowly turned my head, a hollow beat in my chest. Even if we broke out of the circle of Sea Court soldiers, we had nowhere to go but into the sea.

Morven and Vanna shifted, their grips adjusting on their swords, ready to spring into action if needed. Thorne kept a relaxed posture, but I caught the faintest smudge of shadow lingering around his knuckles.

Hastily, I stepped before Sereia, inclining my head respectfully.

“Thank you,” I said, before anybody could leap into a fight. “Faolan is an imposter. He doesn’t deserve the respect of any of the other Courts, much less the crown he wears on his head.”

“Of that, I have no doubt.”

I shivered as the cool point of Sereia’s trident nudged the base of my chin upward until I was looking at her.

Thorne let out a warning growl.

“But since the crown does not belong to Nerida or myself”—the faintest flush of pain swept across Sereia’s face at those words—“I care little which land fae claims it.”

My confidence wobbled. “You won’t—you won’t support me?”

“How can I trust a human who came here to steal the Alder Orb?” Her eyes narrowed, and the trident suddenly swept lower, around Mosswhistle’s head to hook the strap of my satchel. “Although I am curious to know *how* you managed to do it.”

I took a breath. “Why don’t you ask the merfolk? Since you’ve already made it clear you won’t trust the word of a human.”

A flicker of surprise crossed Sereia's face.

"And lower the trident," Thorne warned, his face hard as stone. "Unless you wish to lose the arm that wields it."

Sereia paused for a moment, then withdrew the trident, and my satchel slapped back against my side.

One of the merfolk slunk forward, out between the battalion of Sea Court fae, her long, wet hair snaking over her bare skin.

Sereia jerked her chin in a stiff nod.

"The human drank from the well," the mer said in a voice like the spray of a wave. "She drank from the well and revealed the orb. She did not steal it."

Sereia inhaled sharply. "It's true, then," she murmured. "A human girl truly is Queen of Faerie."

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded again, as if she'd come to some kind of conclusion. "Lower your weapons," she barked, and the Sea Court did as they were told, the ends of spears crashing against rock, cutlasses sliding back into seaweed belts. Some of the fae sank back into the waves that had now lowered to a level with the top of the island, though all of them still watched us cautiously, shining eyes staring at us like a shoal of fish.

Feeling braver, I took a step forward. "You'll support me, then?" I tried again. "To take the crown back from Faolan—"

But Sereia was waving a hand dismissively. "Keep the orb, since you claimed it. Take the crown from Faolan if you can. But I told you. I want nothing to do with the land fae. Your squabbles are your own." A fierce light returned to her eyes. "You think it matters to us what decrees spout from your landlocked palaces?" She let out a bitter laugh before turning to Thorne. "Did your father once visit us under the waves?"

From Thorne's silence, I took it he hadn't.

Sereia shook her head impatiently and turned back to the sea. "No, we want nothing to do with the land fae."

"Okay, what do you want, then?" My mind ticked away. Between us, we had the Forest Court, Flower Court, Mountain Court, and the Metal Court on our side. But we already knew Faolan had the support of the Sky Court, Shadow Court, Frost Court, and Desert Court. We were even. It was important I improve the odds in our favor.

Sereia turned back, arching an eyebrow. "What do I want?"

I nodded, adjusting Mosswhistle in my arms. My limbs were growing

stiff from holding the brownie aloft. “If we were to make a deal, what would your support cost me?”

“Aster,” Thorne muttered in a low voice, his hand finding the small of my back. “Be careful.”

Sereia glared at him. “Does a human girl care more for the needs of the water fae than a forest prince?”

Thorne’s hand was still warm against my back, but he inclined his head. “You’re right. Please speak. Allow me to show you how I differ from my father.” He moved closer to me. “Aster and I are a team. And we are both ready to hear the plight of the water fae.”

Sereia played with a string of pearls threaded through her hair. “It’s simple. We want our independence.”

Vanna barked a laugh. “Come on, Sereia. Even if Aster wanted to, she can’t break the bonds that require the fae courts to obey the Alder Crown.”

“Nor do I expect her to,” Sereia said coolly. “But she can grant us license to make our own rules with regard to how we rule over our seas, our rivers. Our needs are different from the land fae. Time and time again, over the centuries, the Alder King or Queen issues some decree, which makes perfect sense as far as they can see. Except, of course, none ever consider how meaningless it might be for us, under the sea. Worse, how it might harm us. Aster is asking for my support, and she shall have it as Alder Queen—if she takes the crown back from Faolan. I’m asking for a renegotiation of how things work *after* that.”

“I...understand,” I said slowly, a plan still knitting together.

Sereia glared savagely at me. “You *understand*? You, a human, think you can understand the centuries of suffering—”

“It’s *because* I’m a human that I understand.” I met her fierceness with my own. “All the things you’ve just explained—they apply to humans everywhere, as well as to the water fae. Except humans can’t retreat to their own kingdom underwater—we have to live on land with the fae who oppress us. We’re forced to live through the very immediate impact of what the fae decide. As Tithe servants. As slaves. As *sport*.” Rage curled in my stomach as I recalled the games that had been played at the Alder Trials, making the Tithe servants rip one another to pieces.

“That’s why I’m fighting to be queen,” I said, emotion coursing through my veins. “Not to rule the fae, but to change the laws to put humans on an equal footing. To make things better for them. And I’d like to make things

better for you too—”

“Aster.” Thorne’s fingers tightened at my waist. He shot a smile at Sereia, though his eyes were dark. “You cannot expect her to make a deal with you here and now. Negotiations between a queen and a princess ought to happen in Court, not on a whim.”

“Even so,” I interrupted, stepping closer to her. “I have sympathy for your asks, Sereia. And when I am queen, I believe I’ll want the same things you do.”

Sereia’s gaze darted between Thorne and me. “I cannot take humans at their word,” she said again. “If you were to make a bargain—”

Thorne laughed lightly. “Come now, Sereia. What kind of queen is bound by a bargain to her subjects before she’s even taken the throne?”

I bristled as Thorne inserted himself into our negotiations. But, reluctantly, I had to accept he had a point. Striking a bargain with Faolan had cost me dearly.

“You might not trust a human,” I said slowly. “But will you trust the Queen of Faerie?”

Sereia stalked closer, her eyebrows knitted together, tendrils of her damp red hair writhing in the sea breeze. “I cannot read truth or lies in your expressions. I’m at a disadvantage.”

“Yes,” I said evenly. “You are.”

A flicker of surprise swam across her aqua eyes.

“I won’t make a faerie bargain with you, but when I’m queen, we will return to this question. We’ll figure out a way of making things work better for the water fae. I accept your support...and I accept the consequences, should I fail to return to these negotiations.”

Sereia gave me a long, considering glance. “For a queen who claims her only concern is humans, you seem to have many ideas on how to rule the fae,” she said, not unkindly, before stepping away and gesturing for the rest of the sea fae to follow her.

She dove straight back into the waves that were level with the top of the island. I shivered at how easily she disappeared into the water. Perhaps, like the land fae, the sea fae’s bodies were warm enough that the cold bothered them less—or perhaps they were *unlike* the land fae, and their bodies were colder.

I knew that she was right. The water fae, like humans, deserved to be treated better.

“Sereia!” I called after her.

Her head emerged above the water. “We won’t help Faolan,” she said, “and if you become queen, we will kneel to you. But believe me, Aster Wilden, we won’t forget what you promised us.”

More Sea Folk slipped into the water. The curve of tails disappeared beneath the gray waves, scales flashing as the fae swam and leaped and dived, gleeful at returning to their home.

Sereia swam farther out, and the tide began to lower. “We will leave your boat on the beach below. As a gesture of goodwill.”

“Thank you.” I swallowed, daring to ask for one more thing. “Sereia... Do you know where the Alder Scepter is?”

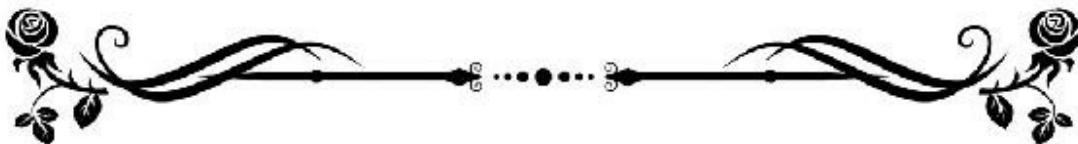
The Sea Princess looked surprised. Then she gave a wicked smile. “I don’t know who guards the scepter. But now that you’ve got the orb, it shouldn’t be too difficult to figure that out, should it?”

Before I could say anything else, she sank beneath the waves, and the rest of the Sea Court followed.

In a crash of water, the tide around the island dropped back to its normal level.

I guessed I would figure it out on my own, then.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



I TIPPED the contents of my satchel onto the ground with a clatter, searching through the jars and potions. We'd made it back to the mainland and had retreated to the tall pine forests that lined the coast. We were only a little way inland, but already I felt safer surrounded by trees.

Mosswhistle lay with its head propped on a balled-up cloak, staring up at me, small pointy teeth bared into a smile and spindly arm raised, gripping my wrist.

My gaze swept over its injuries, painful tears squeezing from my eyes.

“Mosswhistle knows Mistress saved me.” Its voice sounded husky and small.

My throat tightened. I'd only rescued my friend when Faolan had brought it to me and taunted me.

I should have tried harder to discover if Mosswhistle had arrived with any of the other human parties that had escaped to the Forest Court. I should have done more.

“Stay still,” I said past the lump in my throat. I tipped yarrow and a little bit of water into my mortar and pestle and began grinding it into a poultice.

“Mosswhistle helps.” The brownie tried to sit up, pointing at where the others skirted the edge of the woodland clearing, collecting firewood.

“No, you need to rest,” I insisted, pressing the brownie back down.

I spread the poultice onto the strips of green linen Thorne had torn for me from his shirt. I wrapped them around the charred iron burns on Mosswhistle's thin wrists and ankles.

My heart squeezed as the brownie tried to hide a shrill whistle of pain.

“It'll only sting for a moment, then you'll feel better,” I promised. “It'll

help draw out the iron.”

Iron poisoning sapped the very essence of magical creatures like faeries, and Mosswhistle was badly malnourished.

*I abandoned my friend.*

The brownie’s bulbous black eyes stared up at me. Mosswhistle had helped free me from the Sky Court prison. Without its help, I wouldn’t even be here.

“What happened at the Sky Court?” I asked hesitantly. Part of me didn’t want to know the answer, but it couldn’t be worse than what I was imagining. What Faolan had already told me.

Mosswhistle shifted on the makeshift cushion with a wince.

“Mosswhistle helps free the human servants, like Mistress asks. We give them all the antidote. We lead them away from the castle in the sky, down the rocky stairs, and get most of them out. But some humans very slow, Mistress.” The brownie lowered its head. “Mosswhistle goes back, tries to help them hurry, but two guards spot us. Start making noise.” Mosswhistle paused to catch its breath. “One goes back to get help. Other one has a sword, attacks the humans. Mosswhistle leaps from the steps, grabs his feathers.”

The brownie motioned ripping out feathers aggressively but was overcome by a rattling, wheezy cough.

I unscrewed the cap to the waterskin I was using for the poultice and lifted the brownie’s head up slightly so it could take a sip.

After a few mouthfuls, Mosswhistle fanned me away. “Golden prince kills the other humans, Mistress. And Mosswhistle is caught.” Its usually shrill voice was gravelly. “Golden prince knows who Mosswhistle is. Says Mosswhistle is a useful prisoner. He whips Mosswhistle with iron but—worse”—the brownie’s fists clenched tightly—“he calls Mistress terrible names. Mosswhistle defends your honor. Then they throw Mosswhistle in a cell in nasty iron chains.”

I gripped the waterskin tightly. My nose was stuffy, my throat tight and painful.

“Every day, golden fae comes down to the cell and hurts Mosswhistle,” the brownie continued. “Says the screams will bring Mistress back.” Mosswhistle’s voice filled with pride. “So Mosswhistle doesn’t scream once. Not *once*.”

Hot tears slid down my cheeks.

Mosswhistle noticed and clamped its mouth closed, a pained look flitting

across its face. “Something wrong?”

“Everything is wrong, Mosswhistle.” I dashed the tears away with the back of my sleeve. “You should never have had to endure that for me. I should have come to save you.”

I should have spent my time at the Forest Court making powerful enchantments, then attacked the Sky Court and Faolan myself.

Mosswhistle looked thoughtful, then shook its head. “That’s what golden fae wanted. Mistress should not be so risky. She is queen now. Mosswhistle is loyal subject. Mosswhistle was *first* loyal subject.”

I reached out to adjust the poultice bandages on its wrist. “You are not my *subject*, Mosswhistle. You’re my friend. Your life is more important to me than some empty fae title.”

When it came to allowing Faolan to kill Mosswhistle or offering myself in the brownie’s place, I’d been willing to take the risk myself. Silver bells, I’d *dropped* the Alder Orb in my rush to save Mosswhistle. But I also knew the Alder Queen title wasn’t empty. It was my chance to give humans a place at the table, protect them from the more powerful fae.

I exhaled shakily.

Back at the Sky Court, I’d fought with Thorne when he’d said he valued my life above other humans. As a greenwitch, I had been taught the value of all human lives. But I’d just proved that I would do the same. I valued the lives of my friends and family over the people I didn’t know.

I’d almost thrown away the orb for one of the Little Folk.

And I’d do it again.

A gentle pounding started up in my head, and I rocked back on my heels. Twigs snapped, and leaves rustled. The others had returned to the clearing in the wood, and it sounded like they were making a fire. They kept their voices low.

I adjusted the cloak behind Mosswhistle’s head to make sure it was comfortable. The brownie was so thin and frail... I wasn’t sure it had eaten anything in the time we were apart.

“Stay here and rest.” I brushed the straggly hair back from its face. “I’m going to make you something to give you your strength back.”

Mosswhistle wrapped its spindly fingers around my wrist. “Mistress smells different.”

I pressed my chin down, sniffing myself. This dress had been clean when I’d put it on at the Metal Court, but I’d smelled fresher. “Well, I fell in the

sea, and then—”

Mosswistle shook its head. “Not that. Before, Mistress smelled like outside, like the garden. Now, it’s smokier...”

I frowned, then looked over my shoulder. Thorne had lit the fire, a curl of smoke rising from it.

“It’s just the campfire,” I explained, but Mosswistle’s eyes had already fluttered closed, its chest rising and falling with ragged little breaths.

My knees barked in protest as I stood and wandered back to the others.

Thorne and Vanna were talking in low voices.

“It’s under control,” Thorne protested.

“Are you sure?” Vanna hissed. “Because—”

As I neared, they quickly stopped talking. Curse fae and their sharp hearing. They both glanced behind me to where the brownie was curled up beneath another thick cloak at the base of a tall tree.

“What’s under control?” I asked tiredly.

They exchanged a glance, and Vanna opened her mouth, but no words came out. Sharp fae senses were one thing, but their inability to lie was quite useful. They were discussing something they didn’t want me to know.

“Can we talk?” I pulled Thorne to one side, not giving him a chance to answer. “What happened on the island?”

Thorne looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“When Faolan had Mosswistle, you tried to stop me from trading myself.”

Thorne’s cheeks flushed. “Of course I did.”

“It was my decision to make, not yours. I had a plan.”

“Aster, any plan that involved handing yourself over to Faolan would have resulted in your death.”

“You should have trusted me.”

“I do trust you!” Thorne’s voice rose a pitch. “But hollow hills, Aster, *three* times you could have died this morning. *Three times*. When you fell out of the boat, I couldn’t get to you in time, and I thought I’d lost you. When you drank from the well, I hoped that you would be okay, but I was helpless watching you drink. Giving yourself up to Faolan... I couldn’t let you do that.” He was almost shouting now. “It would have been suicide. You can ask me to do anything for you, Aster, *anything*. I will lay my life down for you. I will kill for you. But I will not allow you to give up your life like that. You may love that brownie, but I love you.”

Thorne paused, his breathing ragged. Smoke misted from his shoulders.

A mix of emotions coursed through me. My plan to attack Faolan before he could kill me had been flimsy at best...but it still should have been my choice to make. Thorne had physically held me back.

“So how long will your human witchy healing take?” Morven’s booming voice carried ahead of him as he strode into the clearing with an armful of sticks and dropped them with a clatter.

Vanna glared at him from where she was pretending to busy herself by sharpening her sword with a whetstone.

“What?” Morven asked, shrugging. “What did I miss?”

“I can shadow us back to the Forest Court,” Thorne suggested, looking toward the brownie. “There are healers there.”

I bristled, folding my arms. “Mosswhistle isn’t going anywhere until it gets its strength back. It’s not self-healing like you Court Fae. It’s frail, and it’s been poisoned.”

“But you’ll have more supplies there.”

I shook my head. “The first time you shadowed me, I almost threw up. It’s not so easy for anyone who doesn’t have shadow magic.”

The tone I was aiming for was angry, but the huge lump in my throat made that difficult. My voice cracked into a whisper at my next words. “Mosswhistle is too weak. And it’s been hurt enough. We’re staying here for the rest of the day, and the night, until I’m happy it can withstand shadow walking. Then you can take us back home.”

“Home?” Thorne questioned, raising a brow.

“The cottage,” I clarified, a warm flush rising to my cheeks. The home Thorne had gifted me.

Something in his eyes softened as he nodded.

“I think it would be a good idea if you took a bit of time,” Vanna stood, watching Thorne analytically. “Caught your breath. How about you shadow to get us some things to make camp for the night right here?”

“Is it safe?” Morven asked, gesturing to the trees around us, the haze of blue in the distance. “We’re still close to the Sea Court. Faolan could come back.”

“I don’t think he will.” Vanna shrugged. “The Sea Court made it pretty clear he’s not welcome. And he took off pretty fast when they did.”

I sniffed and nodded, agreeing to the plan.

Everyone dispersed with duties to carry out. Vanna would look for more

firewood, Morven would hunt for dinner, and Thorne would shadow away to get the other supplies we would need to camp here tonight while Mosswhistle healed.

I remained cross-legged next to the fire, brewing an enchanted restorative tea for Mosswhistle. Vanna had loaned me part of her armor to use as a bowl to steep what I needed over the flickering flames.

I'd finished brewing the tea and was lifting Mosswhistle's head to drink it when Thorne returned wreathed in shadows. He carried a huge, bulging pack of supplies strapped with five roll mats and various pots and pans. He deposited it with a thump, then made a beeline for me.

"I'm sorry," he said, with no preamble. "For shouting. I wasn't myself."

"I'm sorry, too," I replied. "If Faolan had asked for you in exchange, I wouldn't have let you go."

He gave me a tender, relieved smile.

At the same time, Morven came crashing through the undergrowth, his arms filled with bloody, furry things.

"Dinner," he announced with a gleam in his eyes.

As the sun faded above the treetops, I told the brownie everything that had happened since I'd last seen it at the Sky Court. Mosswhistle drank all of the tea, never once complaining of its bitter taste.

"Mosswhistle is lucky to sample Mistress's Craft once more." It broke off to cough, then smiled. "Mosswhistle helps clean up before dinner?"

"No!" I said quickly, physically stopping the brownie from getting up. "You must rest."

"But—"

"No buts, Mosswhistle." I inwardly cursed brownies and their overly helpful natures. "That's an order. You stay and rest."

Mosswhistle gave a sly smile. "But Mistress says Mosswhistle is friend, not subject."

The brownie must be feeling at least a little better if it was willing to argue.

I planted my hands on my hips. "Then, as a friend, I'm *asking* you to get some rest."

Mosswhistle pulled the blanket up to its chin with a frown. "Fine." Its owlish eyes softened. "Friend."

My stomach grumbled as I stood and moved over to the fire, where the smells of roasted meat filled the air. Morven's kills were charred and roasting

over the fire, dripping splotches of hissing fat into the flames.

All of a sudden, I felt completely drained.

I'd spent the best part of the day creating my healing enchantments. The sun had sunk below the treetops, the evening light dimming them to silhouettes. I dropped down next to Thorne on a log. Silver bells, I was tired. Like someone had scraped out my insides.

Thorne wrapped a blanket around my shoulders, and I glanced over at where Mosswhistle was nibbling on a small skewer of meat.

"So..." Morven passed me my own skewer. "What do we do now?"

I blew on the steam before tucking in. "We wait until Mosswhistle is feeling better," I said around a mouthful, unable to edge the words with as much steel as I would have liked.

"Yes, but after your little *sprite* friend is healed."

"Brownie," Thorne corrected before I could. I looked up at him in surprise, then leaned into his warmth.

I blew out a breath before returning to Morven's question.

"I hoped that just possessing any one of the items of power would be enough...but it wasn't," I admitted, my insides clenching. Frustration made my teeth ache. "Sereia and the merfolk knew I had the Alder Orb and it still wasn't enough to persuade them to support me. We need the crown." I turned the skewer in my fingers. "I don't think we have a choice."

"We go after the scepter," Thorne finished. "And use its power to take the crown from Faolan."

I hesitated. "We risk leading him right to it...How did he track us here?"

Thorne gave an unhappy shrug. "I don't know."

"Spies in the Metal Court," Morven guessed, with a wary glance at Vanna.

Her brows lowered. "Or the wyverns who told him about the Regalia knew the location of the orb, like Nythoss did. Maybe Faolan had sky fae already watching the island."

"Then it's worth the risk," I said. "Nythoss didn't know where the scepter was. Maybe the wyverns don't, either. Plus Nythoss said the Alder Scepter would amplify my magic. Once I wield it, Faolan won't stand a chance. I'll be able to take back the crown."

"At least we got the orb," Vanna called from where she reclined on the ground, her booted feet stretched out toward the fire and her arms propping her upright. "Not only will its gift of farsight lead us straight to the scepter,

we can keep an eye on Faolan, too. Make sure he doesn't ambush us again."

That was true. Faolan wouldn't stop until he'd killed me, but at least this time we would see him coming.

The orb sat on its own blanket, completing the ring around the fire like it was one of us.

I wiped the grease from my fingers on my skirt then reached for it. Everyone around the campfire held their breath, and I realized they'd probably been waiting for this moment all day while I tended to Mosswhistle.

"Nythoss said all fae would know what this was, even though the Regalia had been forgotten." I glanced around the fae. "Is that true?"

Vanna nodded. "It feels...ancient...and powerful."

"Just like the bone crown," Morven agreed, eyeing the orb warily. "It carries a weight...a dominance. We recognize it the same way wolves know the alpha of the pack."

The glass felt delicate between my fingers. I turned it over gently, examining its smooth surface. I held it closer to the fire and peered inside. Flames flickered through the glass.

"See anything?" Thorne murmured.

A log cracked loudly as I shook my head. I leaned closer, focusing on it, listening to it, but no whispering voices called to me. I frowned, then shook it gently.

Nothing.

"Maybe you have to speak to it?" Thorne suggested.

"Show me the scepter," I commanded, aware everyone was watching me intently. I brought the orb closer to my face, pressing my eye right to it.

"Maybe it's broken?" Morven suggested. "It'd been down that well for a while, and I don't trust those slippery merfolk to take good care of anything on dry land."

Vanna gestured at it with her skewer. "Maybe you can only use it at a certain time of day? Or underwater or something."

I looked down at the orb between my fingers, turning it over.

"Show me the Alder Regalia," I tried again.

This time, I could have sworn a shimmer like rippling water crossed my vision, but as soon as I blinked, it disappeared.

I looked up with a frown. Everyone was staring at me, even Mosswhistle, their faces bathed orange in the glow from the fire. They looked eager, and guilt blossomed in the pit of my stomach.

I made a frustrated noise in the back of my throat. I should be able to make this work. “I’m sorry, I don’t know—”

“It’s fine.” Thorne stood and stretched, his gaze finding the bundle of mats and blankets he’d shadowed here. “We’ll figure it out in the morning. When the brownie is feeling better and you’re not so worried about it.”

I knew I ought to listen to Thorne, to get some rest. But I was so sure I’d been close to seeing something before, when my vision had blurred for a moment. I sat staring at the orb, turning it over and over in my hands until the fire had died down to embers, whispering to it, trying to get it to show me what I asked for.

Vanna and Morven eventually gave up watching me and curled up beneath their separate blankets, Vanna wisely distancing herself from Morven’s rumbling snores. A smile lifted the corners of my mouth as he kicked out in his sleep, like he was dreaming of chasing rabbits. Closer to the fire, Mosswhistle’s whistling snores joined the chorus.

Thorne appeared silently behind me, a gentle hand tentatively stroking my hair.

“Come to bed.”

My fingers froze around the orb at his husky tone.

I turned to look up at him, his fair skin lit gold with the fire’s dying light.

He reached for me, pulling me upright.

“Together?” I said, surprised. Thorne hadn’t sought me out in the Forest Court or the Metal Court.

In fact, we’d not slept in the same bed since the night I’d killed Yvette in the Cursed Court. I thought back to that night now, my cheeks heating, remembering how we’d kissed before falling asleep. I’d been so giddy that he was alive, so exhausted after fighting Yvette.

“Are you tired?” I asked, trying to gauge his invitation. He *looked* tired. There were faint shadows beneath his eyes, his cheekbones sharper, more drawn.

“I haven’t been sleeping well since the Forest Court.” His voice was rough as he led me away from the fire, his hand hot in mine.

“Why?”

“Thoughts of you.”

I bit my lip. “I kept you awake with worry?”

“No, Aster.” His voice was a low rumble. “Not with worry.” He was half wreathed in shadows as I followed him to the far side of the clearing, the only

light the dappled stars above the treetops. He let out a shuddering breath. “I can’t keep away from you any longer. I thought I could, but...”

“I never asked you to keep away from me. I don’t want that.” The words tumbled from my lips. The fluttering in my stomach chased away the feelings of tiredness that had been burning the backs of my eyes just moments ago.

We stopped. Thorne’s chest rose and fell rapidly. He looked...nervous.

“It’s...because...you’re human—” he began. “And I’ve been so...” He trailed off. “I’ve been trying to hold back but—”

I put a finger to his lips. “I don’t know what courtly human rules you’ve been following, but I don’t care that we’re not married yet. You should have spoken to me. I could have told you—”

I looked down at the bed Thorne had prepared. He’d set up a couple of blankets and...

“Are those pillows?” I asked with a sudden smile.

“Just piled-up leaves,” he said. “Anything more would count as Craft. Unfortunately, I’m no greenwitch.”

“I suppose I’ll just have to settle for a forest prince,” I murmured.

I tucked the orb next to one of the pillows, then sat down to unlac my boots. My body felt far too awake and alert, too sensitive to every movement.

It was the same edgy thrill I’d had when I’d first met Thorne. Then, I’d felt like prey and wanted to run away.

Now, I wanted to be caught.

“Let me.” His throat bobbed as he moved closer, kneeling in front of me, then began unlacing my boots.

All words and thoughts fled my mind. My mouth dried as I watched his long fingers brush over the laces.

I swallowed hard.

*Get a grip, Aster—he’s just taking off your boots.*

I tried to give myself a stern talking to, but my whole body was tense, my breathing shallow.

Thorne looked up at me, his eyes dark with desire, his canines pressing gently into his top lip. A flush crept up the back of my neck as he levered off my boot, his hot palms skimming the back of my ankle and sending tingles shooting up my legs.

He unlaced my second boot, pulled it off, and set it beside the first.

I lowered myself to the bed, half in a daze, pulling him down with me.

Vanna and Morven were just on the other side of the clearing. They

hadn't even posted a guard, insisting that their fae hearing would wake them at the first sound of danger. So I wasn't going to let anything happen tonight. Was I?

*Was I?*

The others *did* seem far away, their sleeping outlines barely discernible over the other side of the glowing firepit.

Thorne reached out, brushing the hair back from my face and tucking it behind my ear.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered.

I wriggled closer to him, so close our noses brushed. He froze, his breathing so quiet I could barely hear it.

“So you’ve been thinking of me every night,” I whispered.

“Yes,” he said, staring at my lips as if captivated.

“What were you thinking?”

He didn’t answer. A very fae silence.

“Why didn’t you seek me out?” I asked. “Why did you feel you had to keep away?”

Another silence, then his breath hitched. “Did you want me to seek you out?”

“Yes.”

His arm slipped around my waist, tugging me toward him, closing the gap between us. His heat warmed my whole front. I slid my hands up, around the back of his neck, and into the dark, silken mass of his hair. He hadn’t answered my question about why he hadn’t come to my bedroom before now. I stared at him through my lashes, feeling bold now that we were this close, entwined. “Do you want me?”

He gave a shuddering inhale, his whole body stiffening. His answer was little more than a growl. “Yes.”

Heat pooled in my core, his smoky scent wrapping around me like velvet.

“And I want you.”

In an instant, his lips found mine, soft and warm, frantic, parting as he pulled me closer. His tongue grazed mine, and I couldn’t stifle the breathy sound at the back of my throat.

“Aster...” He pulled away with a groan, my name a plea on his lips. “I need to—”

I cut him off with another smoldering kiss. He kissed me back, fiercely, his hands gripping my waist then moving up to the back of my neck, tangling

in my hair. Tingles raced across my skin, spreading out from everywhere he touched me.

Suddenly I didn't care where we were. It was only the two of us. Only his lips on my skin, my fingers fumbling with the laces of his shirt.

A shrill whistle cut through the night, and we froze, hearts pounding, our limbs tangled together.

“Mosswhistle!” I scrambled away from Thorne and sat bolt upright. “Are you okay?”

The brownie's voice came from a few paces away in the darkness.

“Can Mosswhistle sleep with Mistress?” It moved closer, staring down at its feet. “Golden fae gives nightmares.”

The flames that had swept through my body were doused as if I'd just been hurled back into the icy sea. My throat closed up.

“Of course,” I managed.

Thorne shifted back to make space for the brownie, who dragged its own blanket in between us. It wriggled around for a second, then snuggled down between us.

“Thank you, Mistress,” the brownie said sleepily.

“You don't need to thank me, Mosswhistle. I'm the reason you—”

A whistling snore cut me off, the brownie already fast asleep.

I lay still on my side, staring at the brownie for a while. Guilt and love and a whole host of other emotions tangled up in my chest like briars.

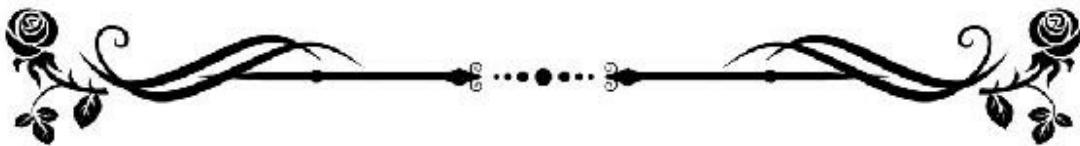
My gaze lifted to where I knew Thorne lay in the darkness beyond, facing me. His breathing still hadn't returned to normal.

I smiled into that darkness, knowing his fae eyes could see me even if I couldn't see him. I mouthed, “I love you.”

My eyes fluttered closed.

“I love you, too,” came the whispered reply.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



THE STREAM CUT through the forest in a trickling rush. The weak, early-morning light illuminated my bare feet as I wriggled my toes into the cool, spongy moss covering the stone below, remembering Thorne unlacing my boots last night... His lips on mine...

I huffed out a breath, my cheeks heating even in the cold of morning.

If I was honest, Mosswhistle had probably saved us from making fools of ourselves last night. There was no chance we wouldn't have woken Vanna and Morven, and we'd never have heard the end of the teasing.

Still... Longing pulsed in my center, thoughts of what had almost happened swirling mistily around my mind.

Silver bells, I could use a dip in cold water this morning.

I'd been careful not to disturb the brownie when I'd woken, although Thorne had roused as I moved. I'd told him I was just going to bathe, but I'd grabbed the orb before disappearing into the trees and following the stream away from camp.

I didn't want to be disturbed.

I'd come to try the orb in the first wash of sunlight. Then I'd tried dunking it underwater.

I sighed, splashing water on it again and watching it carefully, to no effect. Pulling it back out of the stream, I rested it on my knees. Vanna could be right—there might be some trigger needed to make it work, but I was out of ideas.

The orb gave off no whispers like the crown, but then the crown's power came from the life force of all the kings and queens that had worn it before, all of their absorbed fae magic combined as one. That was what gave the

wearer the power to compel fae, to rule them with whispered orders.

The orb was different. It was about visions, not compulsions.

I set it in my lap, staring at the water through the glass, soft rainbow sheens rippling in the orb. My eyes unfocused as my mind began to wander. I thought of Thorne again last night, and then of Mosswhistle.

Guilt squeezed in my chest. Faolan would stop at nothing to kill me. And he knew how to get to me—through the people I loved.

Mosswhistle was safe now, and Thorne was always by my side, but what of my family? We'd sent Ren to Rosehill to look out for them, but would that be enough?

The pain in my chest intensified as I pictured Laurel's copper hair and broad smile, her lilac eyes glazing whenever she pretended to be listening to me.

Laurel was smart and capable, I reassured myself. She and my father had faced the murderous fae of the Folkwood for years. They weren't just any humans, sitting ducks waiting for a fae attack.

The Laurel in my mind's eye suddenly looked very interested.

I let out a yelp.

I wasn't imagining Laurel at all. I could *see* her.

The vision wasn't playing out inside the glass orb like I thought it would, but inside my mind. I saw Laurel talking to someone, the edges of the scene hazy and dreamlike. She was at the Golden Hare—I'd recognize the tavern's beams anywhere.

My breath caught.

How had I made it work? Had the orb read my mind to know that I was thinking of my sister?

I blinked, and the second my concentration broke, the vision faded behind ripples like water, the woodland before me coming back into focus.

Was that the key? Concentration? A shiver ran through me. It felt like the same kind of concentration I used when I was making Craft, allowing myself to sink into a state of flow. Last night, I'd been concentrating so hard on seeing something inside the orb, I hadn't relaxed enough to open my mind.

I tried again.

This time, I thought of Ava, letting my middle sister's beautiful face fill my thoughts. I pictured her dark curls and light-brown skin, her lilac eyes narrowed in distaste at something I'd said, her full lips pouting, ready to berate me.

*Show me my sister.* I let no other thought fill my mind.

My vision glazed with a rippling mist, then cleared.

It showed the tavern again. Ava stood in the doorway as if she didn't want to step foot inside. She had her arms crossed over a beautiful purple gown, her nose wrinkled and her lips curved down.

The picture shifted, filling with rippling water then clearing to show the whole tavern, like I was watching from a spider's-eye view in the corner of the room.

My sisters were there, and my father, too.

*Dad.* My heart swelled in my chest to see him just as I remembered.

I couldn't hear what they were saying, but it looked like they were discussing something. My father's arm gestures were animated, and Laurel kept butting in.

A green-haired faery flew into sight, and my breath caught.

*Ren.*

Ren hovered above the ground, keeping well out of the way of the ginger tomcat who prowled below, looking as distrustful as my father's bristling crew, who stood with their arms crossed.

Orrin brought out steaming platters of eggs, tomatoes, and fried bread. The steam rose, fading as the rippling water filled the orb until I could no longer see anything. I felt both full and hollow, the victory of figuring out the orb at war with being given such a brief glimpse of my family.

The hairs on my arms rose.

I had figured out the orb...which meant I had everything I needed to find the scepter.

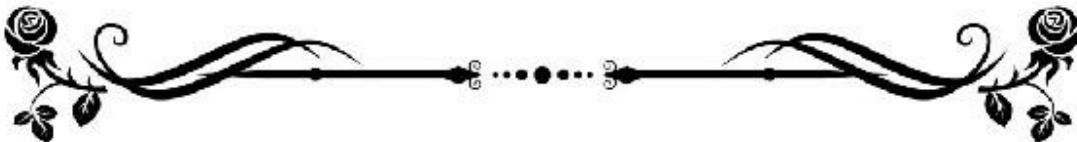
I stood—just as screams rang out from the direction of camp.

My blood chilled, and I almost dropped the orb as I scrambled away from the stream, scratching my heels against rough stone.

I bolted back the way I'd come, the orb clutched tightly to my chest.

The screams hadn't sounded fae... They'd sounded human.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



I RAN BAREFOOT over moss and hard earth and stones. As I got closer to the clearing, I could make out Morven's yells in between the sounds of pounding feet, inhuman screeches, and metal whistling through the air.

I burst into the clearing, skidding to a halt, my gaze darting up to where the air was filled with flapping black wings. Fae creatures the length of my forearm screeched and bared sharp fangs, their wrinkled, skeletal bodies facing toward Thorne, Vanna, and Morven.

My lungs burned, blood singing in my ears.

The three Court Fae had formed a shield in front of a group of humans, protecting them from an onslaught of teeth and leathery wings.

Vanna and Morven slashed at the bat-like creatures with swords, while Thorne fought with twin blades of flames he'd conjured, shadows lifting from his shoulders.

Mosswistle sat at their feet, still too weak to stand but squawking obscenities.

I drew in a sharp breath and glanced around the camp for my satchel, but it was nowhere to be seen. The ground was littered with bodies of dead creatures, torn wings and silver blood spilling out across the ground.

*How many have they killed already?*

I ran low across the clearing, keeping my head down and the orb wrapped close in my arms. The downdraft from flapping wings ruffled my hair and skirts, the stench from the dead creatures so foul it made me want to gag.

I skidded to a stop, ducking down behind the wall of Court Fae and crouching next to the people hiding behind them.

Thorne glanced back at me, his face ashen and sweat coating his brow.

Heat radiated from his swords, the flames casting dancing shadows across his worried expression.

“Aster. Thank Folk.”

“I’m fine,” I called up to him, not wanting to distract him from the attacking fae. He spun back immediately, decapitating the closest creature in one smoking blow.

I turned to the people huddled beside me—two men, two women, and a young girl.

“Are any of you hurt?” I asked, mentally running through the ingredients I’d packed in my satchel and cursing myself for focusing on defenses, not medicines.

The girl trembled, her head tucked under her mother’s protective arm.

“Just a few scratches.” An older woman with long, gray hair spoke, her eyes fixed on my rounded ears. “Nothing serious. Are these your...friends?” She indicated the fae who stood tall above us.

“They are.”

More fae bodies hit the ground with dull thumps. Then Morven gave a yell as one of the bat-creatures got past Thorne’s blades and latched its claws into Morven’s hair, fangs sinking into his corded neck.

Vanna grappled it with her bare hands, the creature tearing out tufts of Morven’s hair as she ripped it free. She made short work of it with a dagger, its vicious screams falling silent.

“What happened?” I breathed, trying not to recoil from the horrifying, leathery creatures.

“These *things* attacked our village, Pinehaven, just down the coast,” a dark-haired man answered. “They chased us into the woods...where we ran into your friends.”

“They were looking for humans with magic,” the older woman said.

My blood turned cold. Humans with magic... Enchanters, then. Did that mean these creatures were working for Faolan?

We all flinched as hot, silver blood sprayed across us. The young girl whimpered, her mother brushing the gore from her dress.

“Did they find any?” I asked, my mouth dry.

“They took the town fletcher,” the woman who was holding the child replied. “They said he was an *enchanter*.” She sounded out the word as if it was unfamiliar to her. “He always claimed his arrows never missed, but he didn’t have magic. None of us do. We’re not fae.”

The young girl snuffled into her mother's cloak. "Why are they doing this to us? We pay our Tithes."

Hot, burning guilt pooled in my stomach. I knew it wasn't my fault that Faolan was hunting down the enchanters. That had always been his plan...but even so, while I quested around the kingdom, plotting against him, humans were already paying the price of his rule.

"Are you all right?" Thorne's voice carried down to us.

I glanced up. The clearing was empty once more, no leathery wings or gnashing teeth in sight. I helped him and the others pull the villagers to their feet.

"Thank you," the older woman addressed Thorne, Vanna, and Morven, although the others still looked wary.

And I didn't blame them. They had been hunted by the fae and saved by yet more fae, all in the space of one morning.

"Would you like us to accompany you back to your homes?" Vanna asked.

"No, we're fine," one of the men said quickly. "It's not far, and those...*things*...that chased us... Those were the last of them."

Morven was already picking through the bodies with a grimace, tossing the carcasses into a pile. "Shadow Court scum," he muttered under his breath, rubbing the bite marks on his neck.

I turned back to Thorne, who was telling the villagers to gather all of their iron and begin making weapons to protect themselves.

I hoped it wouldn't come to that, but if I failed, if I couldn't win the crown from Faolan... These people would *have* to fight for their freedom.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I knew how a fight against the fae would end.

And no amount of iron would save the villagers.



A huge fire burned next to us, the smell of rancid, roasting meat rising in the air with a dark smoke. Morven had insisted we burn the bodies.

After the villagers had left us, I'd at last been able to tell everyone that I had worked out how to use the orb. They clustered around me now, eyes bright with anticipation as they watched me.

“Show me the Alder Scepter,” I demanded.

My vision blurred with the watery ripples once more, then cleared, showing a golden scepter up close. The length of it was textured, carefully twisted at intervals, and the end expanded into an engraved sphere, almost like a bud of petals. The gold was dull.

So either it was hidden in some place with very little light, or it was covered in a layer of dust. Or both.

“What do you see?” Thorne asked.

“The scepter. But up close, I can’t see where it is, except it’s inside and dark...”

“Well, that rules out the Sky Court,” Morven said. “Even the latrines in that place are bathed in sunlight.”

Vanna stifled a laugh. “Maybe it’s in an old grave?” she offered.

I tried again. “Show me the *place* the scepter is in.”

My vision blurred again, and this time, the ripples cleared to show a dark tower, the roof split in two, like horns. My mouth dried, goosebumps prickling over the back of my neck.

“Anything?” Morven asked, his voice eager.

“A dark, horned tower,” I grimaced, trying to find the words to describe what I was seeing. “There’s nothing around it other than mist, and the ground is...waterlogged.”

“A tower with horns,” Thorne repeated. “That can only mean one thing...”

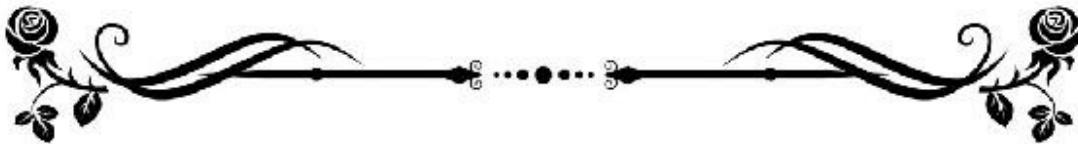
“You know where it is?” I blinked away the vision, looking at the faces surrounding me.

“Well, we know which Court it’s in,” Vanna clarified.

The unhappy look on Thorne’s face kept me from celebrating too soon.

Morven blew out a breath. “The same place as these delightful creatures originated from.” He indicated the smoldering carcasses next to us. “The Shadow Court.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



“THIS IRONDAMMED PLACE,” Vanna grunted. She cut a sidelong glance at Thorne, a lingering inky mist still surrounding him from his shadow walking. “And you complain that the Metal Court is gloomy...”

A smile flickered at the corners of my lips. Vanna’s Court had been underground, sure, but by no stretch of the imagination could the gold-dusted, jewel-encrusted Metal Court be considered *gloomy*. The shadowlands, on the other hand...

A pale-gray mist lingered over everything, like clinging smoke.

Vanna blew out a long breath. “Make no mistake, everything here wants us dead.”

She looked around grimly, every muscle tense, her hands fastened on the hilts of her swords as she tracked the shadows flickering in the clouds above, like circling predators.

I swallowed. Mosswhistle had been outraged when Thorne had shadowed it back to the cottage instead of allowing it to accompany us, but now that we were here, I was all the gladder I’d insisted. This was no place for a brownie, let alone an injured one.

Smoky tendrils clung to my ankles as I walked to join Vanna. Sulfurous smells pressed into my nostrils, and I gripped the strap of my satchel. Whenever Thorne shadow walked us anywhere, it felt like a welcome step into the shade after being in the heat.

But the shadows here were different. This was the darkness of death and decay and nightmares. The infinite darkness beyond the stars.

I tilted my head back. Even in the middle of the day, the sun was nowhere in sight, the sky the metallic gray of a storm. I dropped my gaze. Small balls

of light flickered above pools of water shining around us. They emanated a faint sound, like bells ringing. I took a step closer, the water's surface reflecting the dark-silver skies above.

A hand rested on my shoulder, making me jump. "Don't get too close," Vanna warned. "There are kelpies and worse that live in these waters."

I recoiled, imagining black eyes, sharp teeth, and clawed fingers ready to drag me down to the depths. "What's worse than a kelpie?"

Vanna quirked a brow. "Things that prey on kelpies."

I shuddered. "And the lights?"

"Wisps," she replied. "They're trying to lead you off of the path."

As if they'd heard us talking about them, more wisps floated toward us, their echoing chimes all the more chilling now that I knew their purpose was death.

"How do we find this horned tower in these irondamned marshes?" Morven's booming voice sent the wisps scuttling away and even managed to unsettle crows in the distant trees, sending them flapping and cawing.

I frowned as I turned to where he stood behind Thorne. The Mountain Court fae wasn't built for stealth missions. But I guessed if we needed a battering ram to break down the door to this tower... Well, that was more his wheelhouse.

And his question was valid. Exactly how *were* we supposed to find a tower through the marshes?

Morven looked left and right, then shuddered, shaking his head. "Hollow hills, the shadow fae picked a miserable spot to set up Court."

The wisps had regrouped. Four small balls of light, no larger than my curled fist, bobbed toward Thorne at knee height, like moths circling a flame.

"What're they doing?" I asked.

Thorne swatted them away. "It's my shadow magic. It draws them."

His other hand rested against his belt, close to the hilt of his dagger. He was dressed all in black, and only the subtle leaves stitched around his collar reminded me that he was a prince of the forest, not the shadows.

This Court had enough of those, apparently... Morven had mentioned that there were five brothers.

Exhaustion was etched into Thorne's features, his shoulders tense around his ears. Guilt prickled over me. Last night, he'd said he hadn't been sleeping well because of thoughts of me. At the time, those words had seemed a seductive admission, but now I could see the effect it was having on him. He

looked worn out, his eyes bloodshot and his usual fae glow dimmer, somehow.

“Can you see through the mist with your magic?” I asked.

Thorne shook his head. “No, but those with shadow sight see this land very differently. I can see the safe paths through the marsh.”

I put a hand on his arm, lowering my voice. “Is everything okay?”

Before he could reply, a splash sounded, and we both whirled around.

Something had launched itself out of the water, grabbing at Morven. A scaled arm, the gray-white of a corpse, gripped his ankle with two hands, black claws digging into the leather of his boot and trying to pull him into the water.

My heart leaped into my mouth. I scrambled in my satchel for an enchantment at the same time that Vanna took a step closer, sword raised.

Thorne just watched.

Despite the clawed hands pulling and tugging, Morven was as immovable as an ancient tree. He looked down at the hand with distaste.

Then he swung his axe, bringing it down against the forearm. I clamped my eyes shut just before the blade cleaved through bone with a sickening crunch, and the creature gave a high-pitched, gurgling scream from beneath the water.

Morven took a step forward, casually kicking away the detached hand from his ankle. “Are you going to ask your orb which way to go? I don’t want to hang around here any longer than we have to.”

I shifted my gaze from the severed arm to Thorne’s pale face.

“Okay.” I fumbled in my satchel for the orb, holding it in two hands. “Show me the way to the tower. The safe path.”

My surroundings rippled, blurring, then sharpened to reveal a patch of swamp just like we were in now, with water and rushes and lingering mist, a few wisps bobbing around in the distance.

I gritted my teeth, the vision fading. “It all looks the same. What I’m seeing could be anywhere.”

Morven grunted, but no one said anything.

“I’ll lead the way,” Thorne stepped in front. “Aster, keep close behind me and see if you recognize anything. And watch where you step.”

I didn’t need telling twice, not after the *hand* incident.

We set off through the gloom, Thorne leading us along the safe paths, the wisps drawn to him and clustering around his feet as he splashed through

shallow puddles that had formed in the rock.

I followed, Vanna behind me, then Morven right at the back of the line.

Suddenly, rays of sunshine cut through the clouds in the distance, brightening our surroundings. I blinked, my eyes watering as the light dispersed, casting a diffuse golden glow through the thick cloud above us.

We all halted, staring up at the skies. My eyes burned against the sudden brightness.

“It has to be the Sky Court,” Vanna hissed from behind me. “The shadowlands are always covered in cloud.”

But that was impossible. I’d checked Faolan’s whereabouts in the orb before we’d shadowed here. It had shown him pacing in the pale marble throne room of the Sky Court. He couldn’t have flown here so quickly... Could it be a coincidence we’d run into his soldiers?

I felt the heat of fae bodies against mine as Thorne, Vanna, and Morven clustered around me.

I blinked, adjusting to the light, looking around the newly illuminated Shadow Court.

“Thorne! Look!” I gripped his shoulder, pointing.

The two-horned tower in the distance was like a stick of charcoal jammed into the horizon, lit up by the golden light.

“It’s so close...” A plea entered my voice. “And if we don’t get the scepter now, the Sky Court will get there first. There’s no way they haven’t seen us now.”

“This is too risky,” Thorne said sharply. “The scepter is useless to Faolan. He can have it.”

I twisted to look at Vanna, but she just gave a grim nod. Even Morven didn’t argue against Thorne.

Thorne grabbed hold of me, and Vanna and Morven moved in closer. “We’re leaving—now.”

Cool shadows curled around us—and nothing happened.

I blinked as Thorne’s shadows dispersed again, leaving us standing in exactly the same spot.

“Thorne?” Vanna tugged at his sleeve. “What’s going on?”

His expression was stunned. “I...don’t know.” There was a pause, more shadows wreathing his fists and arms before he said in a slow, bewildered voice, “It’s not working. I can’t shadow walk. I can’t get us out of here.”

Vanna hissed in a breath. “Is all of your magic not working?”

A breeze curled around us, the stagnant water rippling, then flames danced across Thorne's fingertips. "No, just shadowing."

I cast a look over Thorne's gaunt face, the dark circles beneath his eyes. *Something* was wrong with him. He'd sworn he wasn't sick and that he had everything under control...

"Is this—could this be the fae affliction you mentioned before?" I asked in a low voice, avoiding Vanna and Morven's eyes.

Thorne gave a choked laugh before answering shortly, "No."

I pulled back from him, planting my hands on my hips, running an assessing gaze over him, as though he were any other patient come to see their greenwitch. "You've been shadowing all four of us all over Faerie," I said at last. "Could it just be that you're tired—that your shadow magic is running low?"

"Aster," Vanna said in a restrained voice. "Now's not the time to question Thorne. We need to figure out how to get out of here."

"Besides," Thorne muttered, looking anxiously around us. "My shadow magic should be at its most powerful in this Court."

"If we're stuck here, I say we still try for the scepter," boomed Morven, his voice still uncomfortably loud against the eerie silence of the shadowlands. "We might as well get it before that slippery drip of sky magic does."

"Plus once we have it, my magic will be stronger," I added quickly. "That's why we're looking for it, right? So I can challenge Faolan. It might as well be here that I do it. We just need to get to it first."

"Exactly." Morven thumped me approvingly on the back.

Vanna's gaze darted between the two of us, her expression considering.

The tower loomed ominously, backlit by the golden-tinged skies. I shifted away from it even as my gaze was drawn to its cold, jet-black presence.

"It's too dangerous," Thorne snapped, shadows lifting from his shoulders again. "It's Aster's life we're risking. I won't do it."

Morven folded his arms across his broad chest. "Her life is at risk now anyway, seeing as we're stuck here. The Sky Court knows the scepter is here. We'll never get another chance to get it. And if we have the scepter, Aster at least stands a chance of fighting Faolan." He turned to Vanna, frustration lacing his tone. "Come on. You know as well as I do. Retreating is off the table, so this is the most strategic option."

Vanna cut him an assessing look before laying a soft hand on Thorne's

arm and addressing him in a firm, coaxing voice. “Thorne, I understand what you’re going through. No—don’t look like that. You know I do.”

He turned a cynical expression on the metal fae. “You don’t. It wasn’t the same for you.”

“I *do* understand what you’re feeling right now, but Aster and Morven are right. If you can’t get us out of here, our best bet is to get the scepter. We need to arm our queen so that she can take back the crown that’s rightfully hers.”

A low growl rumbled from Thorne’s chest.

“I could even try to use it to get us out of here,” I said quickly. “To help me cast a strong enough enchantment to get all four of us back to the Forest Court.”

Thorne still didn’t reply, his eyes narrowed, his nostrils flaring as he breathed heavily in and out.

“Come on.” Vanna tugged at his arm, leading him a few steps forward. “We need your shadow sight to get us through these marshes.”

A dark expression still stamped across his face, Thorne jerked his chin in an approximation of a nod before leading us through the shallow puddles of the marshes to the foot of the tower.

I watched the back of Thorne’s head carefully. Vanna had said she could understand what he was going through, which meant he was going through something fae. Something she’d experienced before. But *what*?

Thorne’s behavior had been getting more erratic, and every day he looked more tired, as if something were draining him. Now his shadow magic wasn’t working... It couldn’t be a coincidence.

I shivered as we reached the base of the tower, craning my neck back to look up at it.

High above us, blood-red ivy snaked around the building, vivid against the black stone. The exterior was rough, almost as if it were crumbling, as though I could pull chunks of it away with the tips of my fingers. I didn’t dare try. I was sure I’d end up with bleeding hands if I did. My gaze skimmed higher, to where grotesque gargoyles depicting Little Folk leaned out from the wall, mouths open to reveal lines of sharp teeth, fingers pointing right at us.

My jaw set. Such realistic statues could only be the result of one thing. *Human Craft*. And I knew how the Shadow Court treated Tithe humans. How many sculptors and masons had died to erect this tower?

“Well, there’s only one thing for it, then,” Vanna said lightly. “Let’s start looking.”

We swept around the base of the tower until we reached a roughly hewn archway leading inside. I shrank back, the tunnel like a gaping mouth, even darker than the shadow-riddled lands surrounding us.

Thorne snapped his fingers, and flames flickered to life in the palm of his hand, casting a faint reddish glow. He lifted it toward the archway.

I glanced at him. “I thought you said you see the shadowlands differently?”

He cut me a glance, his expression still tight. “This is for you, petal.”

“And us,” Vanna reminded him, digging an elbow into his side. “Or does only Aster get to benefit from your bountiful powers?”

Thorne glared at her. “Be serious about this. Aster’s life is in danger.”

I frowned. It wasn’t like him to snap at Vanna like that.

Morven was already peering into the tunnel. He jerked back, turning to face us with a grim expression. “Gloomy,” he pronounced.

Shivering, I inched closer to Thorne, and the two of us moved forward.

The flames cast a dancing light over the interior. It was made of the same jagged black material, the arched tunnel curving up to a high point above us. And yet more of the roughly sculpted figures were hewn out of the material.

This time they were clustered just above the ground, at our feet...

I clapped a hand to my mouth. These figures weren’t pointing at us. And they weren’t Little Folk.

Bowed, broken, human figures reached out, skeletal faces etched into twisted screams. More of the scarlet ivy snaked around them, like blood.

*Begging.* These humans were begging for mercy.

Thorne’s arm slipped around me, hugging me closer.

“What is this place?” I whispered, increasing my step, tearing my eyes away from the sculptures and looking determinedly into the shadows ahead.

“I don’t know,” Thorne muttered, his arm like a vice. “It’s no palace. It looks long abandoned. And these carvings...”

I swallowed. Other humans would have had to craft them, knowing exactly what it was they were commemorating...

“It’s barbaric,” Vanna said in a low, savage voice. “Like humans were treated eons ago.”

“It’s probably showing just that,” Thorne said stiffly. “This place—it’s ancient.” His gaze slid sideways to me. “This is what it was like to be human

before my father introduced the Tithe laws, Aster.”

It could have sounded like an *I told you so*, but the regret shimmering behind Thorne’s eyes told me otherwise. I reached for his hand and squeezed it gently.

We hurried to the end of the tunnel, which opened straight into the tower without even a door. To my relief, it was still dark, no golden glow to suggest the Sky Court had caught up with us.

I squinted, peering inside. The others slipped in, and Thorne held his hand higher, the flames burning more brightly. Small, narrow windows at the very top of the room let in a dull half-light.

A fist squeezed in my chest.

Inside, rows upon rows of white marble statues stood on tall plinths, more finely carved than the rough figures on the exterior, the pale stone at odds with the dark building. The sculptures were perfect, each feature looking as crisply defined as if it had been carved yesterday, the stone cleverly sculpted into flowing robes.

And every one of them clutched a familiar shining metal scepter...

“Are they fae or human?” Vanna asked, wrinkling her nose. She grabbed a wooden torch from a bracket on the wall and thrust it into Thorne’s flames before moving closer, staring up at one of the statues. The reddish glow danced across its serene expression.

I frowned, tilting my head to one side. Usually, I had a sense for what a craftsman had been trying to convey. I had known right away that the carvings on the building’s exterior were Little Folk, that those lining the archway were human. Even in the Cursed Court, where Yvette’s figures had been woven out of wicker, I had known immediately which were fae and which was a human.

But these statues... In spite of the perfect carvings, I couldn’t tell. They had the grace and poise of the fae, yet the soft features and rounded ears of humans.

“I don’t know,” I said uncertainly. “Could they be—they’re not human kings and queens?”

Thorne let out a hollow laugh. “You think the Shadow Court would have statues of human royalty standing in their lands?” He shook his head. “Besides, there are too many of them. They can’t *all* be kings and queens.”

I bit down on my lip. Something about them still struck me as odd. “The scepters look like the one I saw in the vision.”

I glanced to either end of the room. Narrow arches opened up into two curved corridors containing yet more statues, just visible from where I was standing.

I slipped one hand into my satchel, retrieving the orb. My hands glided over it, as if shining it, bringing it closer to my face. My heart slowed, a soft sigh escaping my lips. Already, it was easier to sink into this state, to block out my surroundings, the time pressure. I focused on my distorted reflection in the orb, issuing a silent command. *Show me the room containing the Alder Scepter.*

A dim picture flickered before my eyes. Of another room, just like this one, with hundreds of statues holding dull-metal scepters aloft.

I exhaled slowly, frustrated. "All I can see are more statues like these. The Alder Scepter could be held by any one of them. Who knows how many identical rooms like this one there are in here?"

"Hollow hills!" Morven threw his hands up. "Then how are we supposed to find the irondamned thing before the Sky Court shows up? This place is huge!"

Vanna clicked her tongue. "For once, can't you use your head, Morven?"

He glowered at her. "You've got a plan, have you?"

Vanna smirked. "Yes, actually." She turned back to the statue she'd been examining and blew at the scepter, sending motes of dust whirling into the air. "Notice anything about this?"

All of us moved closer. Thorne's flames flickered off the glinting metal.

It was just like the scepter I'd seen in my vision, the swirled, textured length, the engraved bud at one end. Except...

"It's silver," Vanna explained. "And Nythoss told you the Alder Regalia were made of bone, glass, and gold."

I'd completely forgotten about that. My eyes gleamed. "Brilliant, Vanna."

Her lips twitched up. "Well, I do like to think I'm something of an expert when it comes to precious metals."

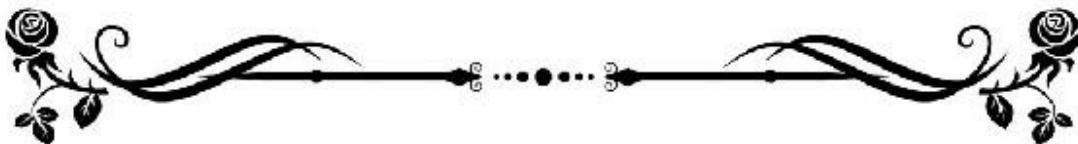
"So we're looking for a golden scepter?" Morven asked slowly. "Among all these silver ones?"

Vanna nodded before cutting a glance at Thorne. "You and Aster should go. Morven and I will stay here and guard the door. Morven swung his axe enthusiastically as he took up station at the archway into the tower.

"If Faolan shows up..." I began.

Vanna drew her swords. "We'll buy you as much time as possible."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



IT WAS difficult to keep a sense of time inside the tower. Every curved room was the same, filled with bookshelves and statues, with only slits for windows letting in any light. The long corridors connecting the rooms were no different, lined with stone shelves built into alcoves, two lines of the statues facing each other down the middle. As we moved through each corridor, we split up, Thorne peering at one line to check for the glint of gold while I examined the other.

We moved into a new room, and Thorne lit the torches mounted on the wall with a snap of his fingers. I looked around, taking in the swell of shadows, the soft smell of dusty books, and shivered. “You said this place was ancient... It feels it.”

Thorne nodded, following my gaze. “I’d guess it might have been a library at one time. Though who knows why the Shadow Court would ever have had an interest in books. They see reading as very...*human*.”

I squinted at the ancient, crumbling tomes lining the shelves. At another time, I’d have been curious to take a closer look...

My gaze snagged on one of the books. Unlike the others, this one was facing forward on a stand, the only book on its shelf. A metal symbol had been embossed on the leather cover, glinting where it caught the flicker of Thorne’s flames. A circle, split in two, topped with a line drawing of a crown.

Recognition flared through me. I’d seen this symbol in the Enchanters’ Guild, back in the Forest Court.

I slipped over to the book, beckoning Thorne to follow me. I brushed dust from the cover, pointing to the symbol. “Do you recognize this?”

He leaned closer, then nodded slowly. “It’s the symbol of the enchanters.”

My heart quickened. “Do you think it will tell us where to find the Alder Scepter?”

I gently eased the book off the shelf and disappointment crashed over me. Even if this book could tell us where the Alder Scepter was in the tower, it was *huge*. It would take me as long to read it as it would to search the shelves.

But perhaps it might still be useful later.

I dropped it carefully into my satchel, grateful that I couldn’t feel the weight of everything it held in its enchanted depths, and returned to examining the statues.

“I really *can’t* tell whether they’re human or fae,” I said, trying to keep the frustration from my voice.

“Does it matter?” Thorne sounded preoccupied.

I didn’t reply, moving slowly from statue to statue to examine the scepters they grasped in their palms. “I don’t know. Maybe it doesn’t matter...” But even as I spoke, something told me it *did* matter. I just wasn’t sure why.

We slipped into the next connecting room—and I stopped, the breath stolen from my lungs by a wash of warmth.

“Aster?” Thorne was instantly at my side, worry etched into his face. “What is it?”

I shook my head, a shuddering gasp escaping my lips.

It was here. The Alder Scepter. I could sense it.

A rippling heat, like the crackle I had felt from the lightning fae who’d threatened me back in the Forest Court, coursed around the room, coating my tongue with that familiar metallic taste—only stronger, like the difference between a fresh plant and a decoction of the same thing.

“It’s here,” I whispered. Without waiting for Thorne, I stumbled forward, the power sending vibrations through my entire body, the buzz of it drawing me immediately to the right statue.

The torches flared to life as I stared up at the statue. It looked just the same as all the others...but there was no question about it. The scepter in its hand shone gold.

“I can sense it...” Thorne breathed from behind me. He shivered. “That power...”

“Here.” I thrust my satchel at him. “Take this and give me a leg up.”

Slinging my bag over his shoulder, Thorne reached down and laced his fingers together so that I could step into them. The heat of his hands closed around my left boot, and then he lifted me up.

I skimmed my hands over the plinth in front of me, keeping my balance as Thorne lifted me higher, until I was face-to-face with the statue holding the golden scepter.

Although, as with all the others, I couldn’t tell whether the statue was fae or human, there was no doubt that she was female.

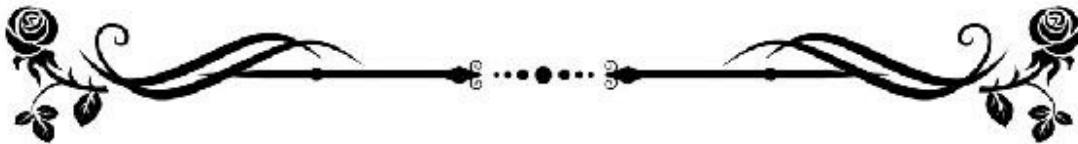
I reached out and took the scepter, my fingers brushing hers. I flinched, as though I expected the cold stone to move, but nothing happened. Exhaling a sigh of relief, I eased the scepter from her grasp, the metal sliding easily from between her stone fingers. Heat rushed into my palm, almost burning my skin. I clutched it tightly to my chest as Thorne lowered me down again.

“We did it,” I whispered, a dizzying wave of relief rushing over me. “We got here before Faolan.”

“So you did.” A cold voice I didn’t recognize rang through the room.

And all the torches went out.

## CHAPTER THIRTY



I BLINKED RAPIDLY as darkness swallowed the room. With only the dim light filtering down from the slit windows, my eyes struggled to adjust as I stared around for whoever had just spoken.

“Thorne—” I broke off as the shadows around us suddenly came alive, clawing around the room.

I stumbled back, clutching the scepter tightly to my chest—and bashed into Thorne.

He grabbed hold of me, and I caught the taste of magic swirling up with the shadows swarming around us before—

Nothing.

He hissed in a breath, head snapping back and forth as he looked around the room.

Dread trickled down my spine. *He still can't shadow walk.*

“I can't get us out of here...” His grip tightened on my arms.

The shadows around us slunk closer, circling, like a predator sizing up its prey. I squinted, still struggling to make much out in the gloom.

“Keep back from those.” His eyes followed the darkness writhing on the walls and floor. His own shadows curled around his fists, tendrils creeping forward, as though itching to fight with those prowling around the edge of the room.

Then, they suddenly retreated, quivering as though excited—or afraid.

A low echo of laughter swirled around us like smoke.

“Struggling with something?”

My gaze jerked back to the archway into the room.

A fae with long, straight, bone-white hair swept out of the shadows,

bringing a wave of darkness with him. I let out a light gasp at the power that flooded the room, the taste of metal almost burning my tongue.

A black cloak rippled from the fae's shoulders, draped over a form-fitting doublet stitched with the twin horns I'd seen embroidered on the clothing of Kage, the Shadow Court heir, whom I'd competed against in the Alder Trials.

*One of the shadow princes.*

"Lonan..." Thorne's voice sounded strange.

I turned my head to look at him, and my stomach plummeted. The color had drained from his cheeks, his eyes wide and his pupils dilated. It was an expression I'd never seen on Thorne's face before.

Fear.

The shadow prince stalked closer, and I bit back another gasp, my knees turning weak. Unlike the dull statues, this fae almost seemed to *gleam* in the darkness. While I thought I'd grown immune to fae beauty after so long in their Courts, *this* fae... Up close, this fae was something else.

Lonan matched Thorne in terms of grace and harsh beauty, with the savage, angled lines of his pale face, the leanness of his body, the imperious tilt of his chin. Dark, curved horns and the pointed tips of his ears poked through his long sheet of hair.

But where Thorne's beauty was now edged with something familiar to me—the deep mysteries of the forest—everything about the shadow prince screamed only *predator*.

I saw no kindness in this fae. I saw death bound in ribbons.

"So," Lonan drawled in a bored, cold voice, "this is the human who helped kill our brother. Who defeated his mate, Neve of the Frost Court, in the final Alder Trial. Who claims to be Queen of Faerie..." Beneath the impassive exterior, I could feel a flicker of interest. His gaze swept over me, chilling my skin where his amethyst eyes touched me.

Thorne let out a guttural growl, shadows wreathing his shoulders again.

Lonan arched an eyebrow. "So *that's* the magic stolen from our Court. And to think, we were worried how much you might know about our ways." A smile played around his lips. "But—oh, dear—I take it you've noticed the darkness doesn't answer to you properly in the shadowlands?"

Thorne's lips thinned. "You—you're what's stopping me from shadow walking."

"Me." Lonan dipped forward in a mock bow.

"How?" Thorne ground out.

“I am the heir to the Shadow Court,” Lonan said softly. “Here, the shadows answer to me. I felt it the moment you set foot in our lands.” He shot Thorne a scornful look. “You really think you could use my own magic against me? In my own Court?”

Thorne’s hands trembled against me, his rage barely contained.

The shadows shook again, and Lonan looked up, a wicked smile spreading across his face.

Two dark-cloaked fae suddenly prowled out through rips in the air, dark mist wreathing their figures. Amethyst eyes sparkled from beneath twin silver circlets, two horns twisting up from each of their brows.

“Meet Draven and Arayesh,” Lonan purred, gesturing to each in turn. “My brothers.”

Draven, the taller brother, had shoulder-length hair in the same dark-pewter shade as Kage’s had been, while Arayesh’s hair was as bright as a silver coin.

Thorne’s grip around my arm was painfully tight. “So, are you enjoying doing Faolan’s dirty work for him?” he breathed out in a lethal tone. “I must say, I’m surprised to learn that the Shadow Court is content to be a mere servant to its new masters in the sky.”

“Quiet, shadow-slayer,” Arayesh, the shorter of the brothers, commanded in a tight tone. “You dare mock our Court after you caused the death of our brother?”

I winced, but Thorne just tilted his head to one side, attempting to look casual. “So you didn’t know that the other fae Courts now see you as little more than Faolan’s lackeys? Or you just don’t like hearing it?”

The shadows reared up, settling into shapes like jagged claws about to strike.

Draven placed a hand on his brother’s arm. “Peace, Arayesh.” He gave a broad smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Remember, Prince Thorne is not the real prize here...”

My stomach tightened into a hard knot as the prince’s calculating purple eyes landed on me.

Thorne let out a snarl, tugging me closer.

Then wisps of shadow slithered over my shoulders.

I shrieked as hot fingers fastened around my wrists and yanked me away from Thorne.

In an instant, Lonan had shadowed me away from Thorne to the far side

of the room. The fae's grip was hard and unyielding, bruising my skin.

"Like vermin caught in a trap," he whispered softly, his lips very close to my ear.

Reorienting myself, I glared at him. "I guess that makes you one of Faolan's hunting dogs."

Rage flickered across the shadow prince's icy exterior.

But before he could respond, Thorne charged across the room, his magic rippling around him in an angry swarm of shadows, of wind, of fire and leaves and ice.

Lonan just smirked.

Before he could reach us, the two other shadow princes—Draven and Arayesh—had moved, vanishing into darkness and reappearing right beside Thorne, sinking shadow-wreathed fists into his stomach.

He roared, a savage, animalistic sound tearing from his throat as he doubled over.

Lightning crackled in the air around him, the pressure of a thunderstorm building within the room.

But before he could land a blow in return, the two brothers had shadowed away again.

And again.

And again.

It was impossible to keep track of them as they tore around the room, slipping in and out of the darkness as if they were made of shadows themselves.

My knees felt as if they might buckle. I'd never seen any fae even come close to matching Thorne's power before. There had always been an unspoken dominance, a furious acknowledgement that he overpowered all of them with the ability to use powers from every Court.

But now that he couldn't shadow walk...

Thorne summoned wild flames, a tearing salt wind, crackling whips of lightning.

But each time he hurled his magic toward the horned princes, they simply stepped into the shadows before rematerializing out of Thorne's reach.

He took increasingly desperate steps toward me, only to be met with angry shadow claws slashing at him, tearing at his clothes, his skin. Holding him back.

I threw up an arm to shield my eyes, the flashes of bright fire

disorientating. I clutched the scepter to my chest.

*The Alder Scepter.*

I suddenly remembered what it was I was holding.

We'd come all this way to make me powerful enough to challenge Faolan—so why wasn't I using the weapon we'd discovered against our attackers?

I weighed the scepter in my hand. Nythoss had told us that it made the wielder's magic stronger. That it would make my enchantments more powerful.

My fingers tingled at the thought, the itch to cast an enchantment building within them, eliciting a wave of heat from the scepter, as though it wanted me to use it.

But what did I have to enchant? There had been ivy growing around the outside of the tower, but it was out of reach, so I couldn't Craft anything with it. I shot a look back toward Thorne, on his knees now as the princes beat him, my satchel still slung across his body.

I chewed my lip, fear and frustration building in my chest.

I had to get us out of here. I had the scepter, and I could sense that it wanted me to try and use it... I cut a glance back at the white-haired male beside me, watching his brothers attacking Thorne with a dangerous smile on his face.

Lonan was the one stopping Thorne from shadowing. If I could only defeat him, then Thorne could get us both out of here...

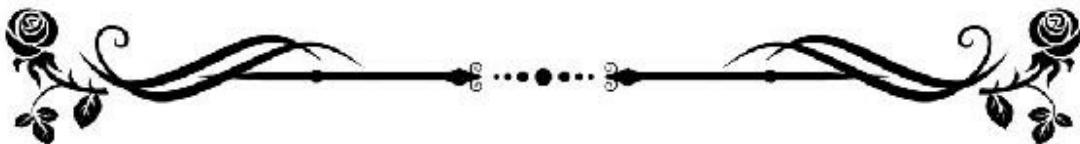
I shivered suddenly. The shadows in the room seemed darker, their clawed edges sharper.

A dim, gold haze lit the archway into the room, growing brighter by the moment, casting the shadows into stark contrast.

Lonan suddenly released me. I gripped the scepter tighter, swiveling to face the arch.

Holding it like a sword, I leveled it before me just as a golden-haired fae fluttered into view.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



FAOLAN LANDED LIGHTLY on the stone floor, flanked by armored Sky Court guards. He took a quick step toward me, a satisfied expression flickering across his face as he looked around the room, taking in the vicious, one-sided fight between Thorne and the shadow princes.

I followed his gaze—and my stomach clenched, the scepter in my grip dropping slightly. Thorne was on his knees, shadows creeping up from the floor and winding their way around his wrists, up his arms, binding him tightly. His face was contorted in fury, mouth open, chest heaving as he tried again and again to fight off the fae dancing in and out of his reach.

Content that Thorne wasn't coming to my aid, Faolan returned his attention to me. His eyes lit on the scepter in my hand.

“Thank you very much for finding that for me, Aster. When Lonan sensed you shadow here and came to fetch me, I knew you must have come for the scepter. I thought I'd give you a head start to find it. And look, you've saved me hours of searching this miserable place.”

I whipped up the scepter again, pointing it straight at him. Faolan didn't know I had no idea how to use it...

He eyed it cautiously for a moment, then, when nothing happened, seemed to realize the gesture was an empty threat.

“Go on,” he whispered coldly, “show me what you can do with it.”

Something pulsed in my throat. I hesitated, then lowered the scepter a fraction.

His lips twisted up. “I thought so.”

Behind me, Lonan shifted closer. I recoiled as his shadows whispered over my skin, like small tongues tasting it. They fastened around my throat, a

smoky line binding me to him like a chain.

“Lonan!” Thorne’s ragged voice, streaked with pain, shot across the room, his hazel eyes fixed on the two of us. He made another effort to stumble toward us, but the brother with the darker silver hair—Draven—swiftly shadowed in, bringing a whip of shadow up and across Thorne’s chest.

With agonizing slowness, Lonan turned to Thorne. A cold, lazy smile lifted his lips. “Do I have something you want?”

Agony ripped across Thorne’s face.

I wrenched against my shadow bonds with a cry, lurching and arching away from Lonan, but they held.

Tutting, Faolan lifted his hands and carefully removed the bone crown from his head, holding it out in front of his chest. “Did you know, Aster, that this is a crown of *death*?” He ran one hand lightly over the jagged points. “The fae respond to it because that’s the power they sense in it—their undoing. Imagine what terror that inspires in near-immortal beings. So you see, Aster, this symbol of death compels the fae through fear.”

“And its price is also death,” I whispered.

That was what was needed to claim its power. That was why the Alder Heir had to kill the current king or queen. The key to unlocking the bone-welder’s enchantment.

Faolan replaced the crown on his head, adjusting it neatly over his golden waves. “But at the Alder Trials this year, you paid the death price instead of me. And now it’s time to redress the balance...”

“We ought to thank you, really,” Lonan whispered, his breath tickling my ear. His shadows snaked around my collarbones. “None of us knew such a powerful weapon was hidden on the outskirts of our lands all this time.”

Something pulsed inside my skull, my breath catching in my throat. We’d led them right here.

Faolan’s lips twisted higher. “Unfortunately, what you fail to realize is that this is a weapon you *can’t* use, Aster. The wyverns told us that the scepter amplifies magic. And, as a human, you have no magic of your own.”

I bit back the retort building in my throat, hope suddenly blossoming in my chest.

*He thinks I can’t use it.*

No doubt that was the only reason he hadn’t killed me instantly. But Nythoss had been sure that I *could* use the scepter. That it would amplify my

enchanting. And I could feel it, warm in my hands. It *wanted* me to enchant something.

But it was only as long as Faolan thought I couldn't use the scepter that he didn't kill me now.

The sky prince dusted down his front. "Now, I very much doubt that either of you are going anywhere since Thorne appears to be rather *tied up* right now... So I can afford to take my time with you..." A glint came into his eyes as he took in the shadow bonds writhing around Thorne, leaving red bands across his flesh where they cut into him. "But just in case... Cethin? Could you bring our newest recruits through here?"

A fourth shadow fae ripped open the air, stepping out of the darkness. He was tall and thin with cropped, pale-pewter hair and a scar running down one of his cheeks. Beside him appeared two other figures.

My stomach lurched. *Vanna and Morven*.

I waited for them to move, to fight or run toward us, but their eyes were glazed with a lilac film, and they remained limp and still, like the statues lining the room.

A sick, greasy feeling filled my stomach. So this was what it meant for the Shadow Court to compel the other fae...

"Have them guard the entrance," Faolan barked. "Make sure no one leaves this room."

Cethin said nothing, his scarred face a mask as he blinked and lifted a hand, gesturing toward the archway. My heart lurched as Vanna and Morven stepped forward, weapons held aloft.

"Vanna," I whispered, my voice coming out in a croak. "Vanna!"

Not a trace of my friend remained behind her purple-tinged eyes.

Faolan let out a low chuckle. "Call all you want. She won't respond." He turned back to the fight, stroking his chin. "Draven! Check that satchel, will you?"

The two shadow fae reappeared on either side of Thorne. The first—Arayesh—clutched at Thorne's throat with claws of shadow while Draven rummaged around in my bag.

Triumph lit his eyes before he extracted the shining glass orb. He turned it in his fingers. "What a pretty trinket this is. Far too fine for a human." His lips curved, his gaze shooting to Faolan before he threw the orb to the sky prince.

I followed the smooth arc as it flew across the room before slowing, the

air stirring as Faolan summoned a wind to cushion its fall. It stopped just short of him, hovering, the glass shining as it spun.

Faolan reached out and plucked it from the air, holding it reverentially.

Coldness washed over my body. The orb was *mine*—I’d drunk from the well to retrieve it—we’d fought off the Sky Court and bargained with the Sea Court to keep it. I’d even figured out how to use it on my own.

Only for it to end up in Faolan’s clutches anyway.

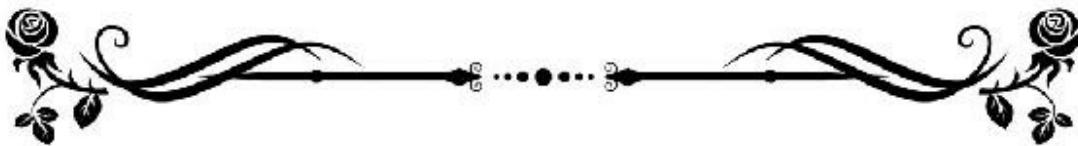
The sky prince let out an exhale. Then he swiveled to Thorne, speaking in a savage, triumphant voice. “How does it feel, Thorne, to be completely powerless? To be unable to stop me from taking back the orb Aster stole from the Sea Court? Worst of all—to see your mate wrapped in the shadows of another male?” His voice dropped to a whisper. “To know she’s about to die... The mating bond must be causing you a great deal of pain not to rush to her rescue.”

My world turned sideways.

*Mate.*

Faolan had called me Thorne’s *mate*.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



THE BLOOD DRAINED from my face, waves of hot and cold rushing over me.

It wasn't possible—Thorne had told me it wasn't possible for humans and fae to share a mating bond.

I was dimly aware of Lonan snickering. “Perhaps Thorne really isn’t as powerful as we’ve all been led to believe if the female who’s his true equal is this inconsequential human. Imagine, the embarrassment of having a human for your mate...”

*Mate.*

The word knocked around my skull, deafening in my ears.

But it couldn't be—I would have known, wouldn't I? Or Thorne would have?

A hard lump bobbed in my throat.

My gaze found Thorne’s, his hazel eyes glittering with emotion.

In that moment, I knew it was true. All of his strange behavior since the Forest Court... It suddenly made sense.

And that meant he'd known for well over a month.

“Wait...” Faolan dragged the word out, and I could sense his attention turning back to me. “You mean... She didn’t know?”

I stared down at the floor. I wanted desperately to speak to Thorne—but not here, not like this. Not in front of Faolan and this deadly fae who had wrapped shadows around my neck. Not in front of *any* of the Shadow Court.

A thumping pounded in my ears, and my mouth felt as if it were stuffed with dry, prickling grass.

“She didn’t know!” Faolan repeated again, the glee dancing in his voice. He made a tsking sound before crowing, “Dear, dear Thorne—not only have

you lost Aster to me *again*, you've no doubt lost her trust now, too. What did she *do* to make you keep something like this from her?"

Acid burned the back of my throat. Still, I didn't look up—not at Faolan's smug face, and not at Thorne. I couldn't bear to see his expression.

*He was my mate.*

And he hadn't told me.

"Is it really any wonder he kept it a secret?" Lonan whispered. "Hollow hills, I'd be embarrassed, too..."

A shudder of rage rippled through me.

*Thorne is my mate.*

I dropped to the floor, my ire making me act blindly, unthinkingly.

The shadow bonds cut into my throat as I pulled against them. But I didn't care.

I rammed the scepter against the cold, stone floor. My fury poured out through my hands, burning hot where it met with the metal.

A high, buzzing whine filled my ears as I reached out, wildly searching for any scrap of moss growing on the stone or ivy creeping through a crack in the wall.

Lonan yanked the shadows up, choking me—but too late.

A low rumbling from above us built to a roar, followed by the thud of rock clattering against the floor as the ceiling began to fall in around us.

I jerked my chin up, the already raw skin on my throat chafing painfully against the shadow bonds.

The red ivy burst in through the narrow windows, exploding through the stone as it swelled and grew.

My hands burned hotter, the scepter searing my palms as emotion sang through my blood.

Within moments, a scarlet tangle of leaves and vines had poured into the room, a huge, snaking mass of ivy that filled the air like a cloud. Chunks of stone split and fell in the vines' grasp, thudding down around us as they squeezed tighter around the tower.

I didn't hold back as the snarl of vines forced their way into the room. As I clutched at the scepter, my pool of magic felt endless, limitless. I'd enchanted ivy before by braiding it, but I hadn't so much as touched these blood-red plants.

*I don't need to use Craft when I've got the scepter...*

The realization burned through me.

I sucked in a breath, exhilaration joining the rage flooding my veins. I hadn't enchanted like this, so wildly out of control, since the revel at the Cursed Court.

"Don't let her leave!" Faolan screamed over the thunder of stone splitting and cracking as the tower crumpled in on itself.

Blinding beams of light flashed through the red vines, sending crimson sap splattering like blood where Faolan's sunbeams burned through them.

I ducked lower to the floor, ignoring the shadows tightening around my neck.

"Aster!" Thorne's voice was panicked.

I cut a look to one side to where he was tearing through the vines, blasting them away with bursts of fire and ice. He must have gotten away from the other princes in the chaos.

His face was pale, livid bruises streaking across his pale skin. "I'm sorry," he grated out. "I'm sorry..."

I couldn't speak, couldn't think what to say. Magic still poured out of me, the enchantment spilling from the scepter, the coils of ivy growing thicker and wilder within the room.

Then the scepter suddenly gave a lurch, almost slipping from my fingers.

I grabbed it tighter, a low growl escaping my throat.

Shadows wound their way tightly around the scepter, trying to tug it from my grip.

Lonan appeared between the vines, black shadow-claws raking them aside like he was tearing weeds from the ground, his long, white hair billowing out behind him.

A hot, furious knot tightened in my chest.

Even now, knowing that I could use the Alder Scepter, this arrogant prince thought he could simply snatch it away from me.

I reached one hand into the satchel still slung across Thorne's shoulder, and my fingers closed around a glass bottle.

I hurled it at Lonan.

He whipped up a hand, smashing through the glass midair. Tiny, sparkling motes like dust rose into a cloud around him as the glass fell tinkling to the floor.

Only, it wasn't dust.

Lonan's movements slowed, his face frozen in outrage. He swayed, slowly losing control of his body. The shadows around him wavered, like a

retreating tide.

And then he crumpled to the floor.

*Lindenflower pollen.* On its own, it could be used to bring a more restful sleep...but I'd enchanted it. Now, it caused a sleep so deep it was a kind of living death. I'd gotten the idea from the faesickness that affected humans, which I'd seen in the Rosehill girls and the Tithe servants in the Sky Court.

I stared at Lonan, his body spread limp on the floor. His breathing was shallow.

"Thorne!" The word tore from my lips. "Get us out of here!"

His hands closed around my arms, his shadows swarming around me as he summoned his magic to carry us away through the darkness.

The room began to fade.

*It worked.* Lonan's shadows were no longer keeping us prisoner here.

I relaxed—then stiffened.

Shadows still coiled tightly around the scepter, the darkness attempting to wrench it from my grip.

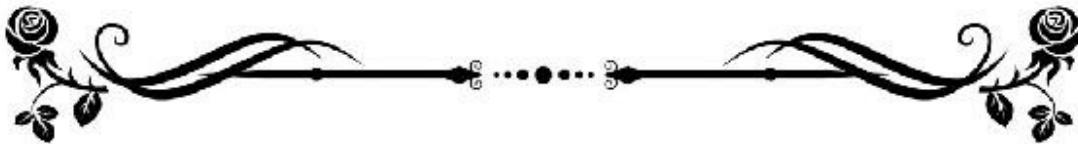
Cruel laughter floated through the air.

My eyes widened as I saw Draven standing a few paces away, a thin line of shadow running from his fingertips to the bonds wrapped around the scepter.

"Wrong brother," he whispered.

Panic pierced my belly as I felt the metal yanked from my grip, and the room around us dissolved.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



FOR THE FIRST time since I'd left the Cursed Court, Thorne's shadow walking made me feel lightheaded. Bile rose in the back of my throat as I pulled away from him, leaning forward and sucking in too-short breaths of air. The sulfurous smell had at last vanished, replaced by the fresh scent of pine.

Thorne must have shadowed us far away from the Shadow Court.

Slowly, I turned my palms upright, staring at my empty hands.

*I lost the scepter.*

“Aster...” The uncertainty and tenderness in Thorne’s voice sent a fresh wave of fear and anger burning through me.

*He’s my mate.*

“We need to find a way to save Vanna and Morven,” I said flatly. I pressed up to standing, trying to ignore the sickness building in my stomach. “We can’t leave them. And now Faolan has the orb and the scepter...”

Thorne had bent over double too, catching his breath. He righted himself with a wince. “We had no choice. Now that Faolan has all of the Alder Regalia, he won’t hesitate to kill you to make them work for him. I won’t take you back there.”

A flash of anger rose in my throat. “We can’t just leave them.”

Thorne held his side and took a halting step closer. “Vanna and Morven are more use to Faolan alive than dead. He won’t kill the heirs to two Courts lightly—this isn’t the Alder Trials. The death of an heir would have very serious consequences. Two would start a war.”

My heart pounded wildly in my chest, my pulse crashing in my ears. I was too hot. I moved to lean against one of the trees, its coarse bark rough against my palm.

So much had been taken from us since we'd arrived at the Shadow Court. Our friends...the orb and scepter...

*And Thorne is my mate.*

I pushed that thought aside and gritted my teeth.

"Aster... I'm sorry." Thorne edged into view, violent bruising and angry red welts covering his front where the shadows had attacked him. Torment was etched across his features.

Angry tears pricked at my eyes, and I turned away from him again. It wasn't fair that I should be worried about him right now, not when I was so mad at him.

My insides tightened, a painful lump in my throat blocking the words that wanted to spill out.

Thorne scrubbed a hand across his face. "I didn't want you to find out like that."

"You didn't want me to find out at *all*," I choked out, glaring back at him.

Thorne's mouth opened and closed, his lips pressing into a long line.

How long had he kept this secret from me? I'd guessed it might have been since the Forest Court, but what if it had been even longer? My mind raced back through our time together. Had he first realized at the Alder Trials? When I'd broken his curse?

My blood chilled. Was this the real reason he'd chosen me at the Tithe? Some fae magic guiding his every action?

I turned to face him, slowly, tilting my chin up and willing tears not to fall. I didn't want pity. I wanted answers. "How long have you known?"

"Since the Forest Court," he replied. "Something happened when you took my hand. I don't know how to explain it."

"Try." My jaw ached from grinding my teeth so hard.

"You touched me, and it was like everything I felt for you...magnified. I stopped just feeling it with my body, but with my magic, my whole *soul*. I knew then, for sure, what you were to me."

*His mate.*

"And you had no inkling before that?" My tone betrayed my doubt.

"I..." His words cut off.

He'd been about to lie to me.

I crossed my arms, pain pulsing behind my eyes.

He tried again, his voice a fraction louder. More strained. "There's no one way a mating bond works. It's different for every fae, just like falling in love."

There had been a few times when I had wondered.” He ran a hand through his hair. “When you ran away into the Folkwood, at the Cursed Court... I can’t explain it, I just awoke knowing you were in danger.”

Thorne had appeared just in time to save me from the barghest. I had been the only girl he’d managed to save from the Folkwood’s clutches. Had there already been a ghost of this link between us?

“Then when Faolan took you. When I was searching for you... I couldn’t explain how, but I *knew* you were alive...”

I pressed my lips together.

Every muscle in Thorne’s body was tensed, his fists curled at his side. He kept slanting back from me, as if pulling against an invisible force that was drawing him closer. There was a wildness in his eyes that I’d only seen when he was the Beast of the Folkwood.

“Who knew?” My voice was quiet but knife-sharp.

Thorne’s throat bobbed.

“Who knew?” I repeated.

“My mother. Ferne. Ivye,” he began. “Any Court Fae would be able to sense it right away. I asked them not to say anything. I sent a bird ahead to Vanna.”

Outrage prickled up the base of my back.

So that meant Ren and Morven, too. It meant *every* fae I’d met in the Forest Court, the Metal Court, the Sea Court.

I’d been trying to convince them I was the Queen of Faerie, and they’d all been laughing at me. Silly, human Aster who had no idea that her fae fiancé was actually her mate.

Anger blossomed in my stomach, burning its way up my throat.

I clenched my fists, pacing now. “How could you keep this from me, Thorne? After the Sky Court, we promised we wouldn’t keep things from each other. That we were a team. You asked me to be your wife, you call me your queen, and yet—” A sob tangled in my throat, and I sniffed in a deep breath, knowing that once the tears started falling, they wouldn’t stop. “And yet,” I continued slowly, “you kept something so huge from me.”

“I had a very good reason for not telling you, Aster.”

I gave a strangled laugh and began walking into the trees. The heady scent of pine was overwhelming, the colors too bright after the dreary Shadow Court. The mossy ground sucked at my boots as I walked.

I needed to move, needed to *think*.

Thorne's footsteps followed behind me, although he kept a little distance between us.

I sniffed again through my stuffy nose. I wanted to scream into the treetops. I wanted to throw something.

I stopped, leaning back against a tree. I hefted my satchel up closer with my knee, rooting around for what I needed. Soothing ribwort plantain, witch hazel, and calendula. I mixed them with a little water just in my palm, making a thick paste of the herbs.

Twisting back to Thorne, I thrust my arm out, indicating for him to use the poultice. He would heal in his own time, but I couldn't bring myself to be as angry with him as I wanted to be while he was still bloodied and bruised.

"You said it was impossible. In the Sky Court. I asked you about fae mates." I kept my eyes trained on the paste in my hand, my voice low. "You said a mating bond between fae and humans was unheard of. You said the bond is magical, so it should be impossible. How could you lie?"

Thorne remained quiet for a moment, then his fingers scraped against my palm as he scooped up some of my healing poultice. "I said I'd never heard of a fae finding a human mate. Because I didn't believe it then. It was only when I realized you were my mate that I could believe it must be possible. And you seemed *happy* that we'd fallen in love just as humans do. Which we did. I didn't want you to question that. Question my feelings for you."

So he'd lied to me. He'd fobbed me off with pretty words about how we'd *chosen* each other. Just like Faolan, who traded in wordplay and hidden meanings.

"So it *is* possible."

Thorne's voice lowered. "The bond is there...for me. But I'm fae." He applied the poultice to his wounds, unable to meet my gaze. "With a human, it might not be possible for you to reciprocate."

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"You're human with no magic in your blood, Aster. This is a *magical* bond. I have no idea what it would do to you if you accept it. It might kill you. I can't risk that."

He wiped off the poultice residue against his sleeve, a muscle flickering in his jaw. "When fae accept the mating bond with each other, they open a sort of *channel* between them. They can share in each other's magic. And my magic is powerful. It would likely be too much for a mortal body."

I shook my head in disbelief. All this time, he'd known. He'd proposed to

me while hiding something so big. How did he think I wouldn't notice? A hot flush burned up into my cheeks.

I had deserved the truth. I had deserved to know about a magical bond that would affect me. We could have discussed our options together.

"You should have told me," I snapped.

"I did it to protect you. I knew you would risk accepting the bond."

"How could you know that? If you'd have explained it, told me about your concerns..."

Thorne leaned against a tree and sank down slowly. I'd never seen him look so...defeated. His body was healing thanks to his magic and my poultice, but his eyes were sunken, his shoulders slumped.

"I thought I would be able to handle it." He looked up at me sadly. "The unrequited bond. I thought I could be stronger than Rowdon was with Eila."

I blinked in surprise at the mention of Thorne's old friend and Eila, Yvette's daughter. The girl whose death was the reason for Thorne's curse.

"Rowdon claimed she was his mate," Thorne continued. "That the bond had snapped into place for him the moment he set eyes on her at Court. But we couldn't sense a bond, and so we just thought he was infatuated with a pretty human."

"If he said it, then it had to be true."

"Fae can say anything they *believe* to be true. It's why I could tell you it was impossible for a mating bond to develop between a fae and a human."

I pursed my lips but didn't say anything, rubbing my thumb along the strap of my satchel.

"He had been acting oddly before the chase. He got into fights with any male who so much as looked at Eila. He wasn't sleeping. Barely eating. He followed her everywhere. But we put it down to him being a besotted lover." Thorne cleared his throat and continued, "I found out later that before the chase through the woods...Rowdon had told Eila about the bond. That she was his mate. But she said she wanted nothing to do with him. The rejection reduced him to madness... He lost all sense of himself..."

He dropped his head into his hands, and I stared down at him, feeling lightheaded. We lapsed into silence. The revelations whirled through my mind, nausea taking root in the pit of my stomach.

After a few moments, Thorne slowly raised his head, his eyes glittering. "We are in an impossible situation with our bond, don't you see? If you accept it, there's a strong chance my magic will kill you. But if you reject me,

I might succumb to the same madness as Rowdon did and end up hurting you.” The words caught in his throat. “I thought the best course of action was to do nothing, at least until we’d gotten the crown back from Faolan. I would have told you eventually, Aster, but I thought I was strong enough to deal with the side-effects of an unfulfilled bond in the meantime.”

“The side-effects?” I asked.

“Distraction, over-protectiveness...*want*.” He stumbled over his words.

Was this why he’d avoided coming to me at night? I thought back to the heated moments we’d shared at the campsite, how some of the things Thorne had said about keeping away from me had made no sense.

“You should have trusted me enough to tell me.” My words were a furious whisper. “I am not Eila, and you are not Rowdon. This is completely different. We had plans to rule together as equals.”

And if I couldn’t trust him to tell me something as big as this...

The memory of Faolan’s sneering, golden face had me curling my fists, nails digging into my skin.

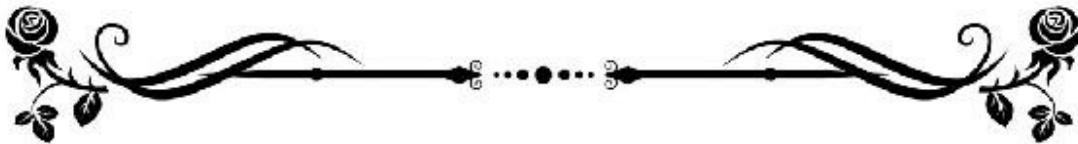
Faolan had known more about my relationship than I had.

All of the Court Fae must have been laughing at me, a human playing at being a fae queen.

The anger swirled with humiliation and betrayal and sadness, and the inevitable tears pricked at my eyes. This was all too much to process.

“Take me back to the cottage,” I managed through my tight throat. I reluctantly held out a hand, averting my eyes. “And then leave me. I need to be alone.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



I DIDN'T SLEEP the first few nights after the Shadow Court. And I barely slept the week after that, tossing and turning in bed, my legs and mind restless.

I'd lost it all. My friends. The Alder Regalia, my chance of proving to the fae that I was the true queen and my chance to fight for humans, to create a Court of our own. A future with Thorne.

“Mistress gets up today?” Two bat-like ears poked up above the edge of the bed, a steaming cup of tea and a saucer balanced on the brownie’s hairy head. “Mosswhistle has tea and dress.”

It held up a teal-green dress and a creamy pinafore embroidered with daisies. The kind of outfit I’d worn every day at the Cursed Court.

I swallowed hard. Over the last few weeks, I’d done everything in my power not to think about the Cursed Court...or its master. It still hurt to think about Thorne right now.

And yet...what else should I be doing? Why was I here, avoiding everyone in this cottage, spending my days pottering around and making enchantments, if I wasn’t considering what to do next?

The truth was, I still had no idea what to do. I was so angry that Thorne, the one person other than my family whom I’d thought would never lie to me, *could* never lie to me...had kept this huge secret.

Vanna and Morven were at best captured, at worst dead or dying. Faolan had all three of the Alder Regalia. I didn’t know how long it would take him to hunt me down, but now I didn’t even have the scepter to help defend myself.

I needed a plan, but I had nothing.

“Mistress?” Mosswhistle squeaked. “You get up? Or stay in bed today?”

Silver bells, I wanted to stay in bed. There were some days when all I could manage was to crawl back under the covers and have Mosswhistle bring me endless cups of tea and slices of buttered toast. But then I'd spend the day stewing on this impossible situation—without figuring it out—kindling the despair and resentment in my belly.

Much better to get up and do something. To help Mosswhistle around the cottage or work in the garden among the plants to take my mind off of things.

I unclenched my jaw. "I'm getting up."

Mosswhistle tossed the clothes onto the bed and slid the tea onto the wooden bedside table.

"Thank you, Mosswhistle," I murmured.

The brownie had barely left my side since I'd arrived back at the cottage. It was still hobbling slightly, but nothing I could say would persuade it to rest.

Somewhere in between stepping foot back in the cottage, slamming the door, and bursting into angry tears, I'd noticed how beautifully clean the place was, the smells of wood polish and lemongrass mingling with the floral scents drifting in from the garden. Mosswhistle had done all of that while we were at the Shadow Court.

I slipped into the adjoining bathroom, where the scents of rose water and apple wafted from a bath filled with frothy bubbles. I washed, dressed, and padded through to the kitchen, scrunching my wet hair with a towel.

The morning light crept through the diamond-pane windows as Mosswhistle leaned over the stove, stirring a huge pot of porridge that was large enough to feed the whole of Rosehill. I'd barely eaten while I'd been here, the sickness in my stomach not abating as I fretted, but this morning my stomach growled at the smell.

I pulled up a stool, watching the brownie sprinkle cinnamon into the pot. "I'm going to work in the garden today," I mused out loud.

"Very good," Mosswhistle crooned, pouring an excessive amount of honey and cream and stirring vigorously. "Mistress does her Craft today? Craft will help make Mistress happy again?"

I gave Mosswhistle a fond smile as it spooned porridge into a bowl and hopped down from the counter to hand it to me. "I'm not sure what I'll do yet."

The brownie pulled up a stool next to me, drinking the cream straight from the jug. "Mistress looks pretty," Mosswhistle acknowledged in between

slurps, then paused. “Master visits us, maybe?”

“No,” I said flatly. My spoonful of porridge tasted like nothing.

Thorne had left me alone as I’d asked him to, giving me the space I needed to process this. And yet all I’d been able to do was listlessly pace the cottage thinking about him. Thinking about what it meant that we were mates. What it might mean to accept a magical fae bond that wasn’t meant for humans...and wondering what was happening to Thorne while we were apart. Was he getting worse?

I propped one elbow on the counter, stirring my spoon through the porridge in my bowl. Even if I could forgive Thorne for keeping this from me, I still had no answer to the problem of the mating bond. Accepting it might kill me. Rejecting it might send Thorne completely mad—even just doing nothing meant he was slowly deteriorating.

But maybe being apart from me would allow him to clear his head. Maybe it was proximity to me that caused the negative side effects. Maybe separation was the only answer...

*Maybe, maybe, maybe.*

I knew nothing for sure. Tears squeezed at my eyes again, and I stood. I needed a distraction.

Leaving the rest of my breakfast unfinished, I headed out to the garden, tying my apron around my waist. It had clouded over, the sky above the trees a light gray. I planted my hands on my hips, assessing the overgrown beds. Really, I should spend the morning cataloging the various plants that grew in a tumble, spilling out of their beds and escaping their trellises, but I needed to do something physical.

I set to work weeding, using my bare hands to tug creeping buttercups from between the paving stones and yanking up wisps of bindweed that were strangling the passion flowers. Some of the weeds I set aside for use in my workshop; others I tossed onto the compost.

As I knelt on the ground so close to the earth, my fingers plunging into the dirt, my stress and anger and hurt seemed to seep into the soil.

I wasn’t enchanting—my hands remained cool—but I was focused, and it felt good to do this, to go back to my roots in the space where I was most comfortable, where I was in control. I could decide how these plants grew, what I nourished and what I ripped from the ground. I knew how to deal with adverse weather and pests and varying soil conditions.

If I could be queen of nothing else, I could be queen of this tiny garden.

After several hours of weeding, I planted my hands on my waist, staring around.

*What next?*

A few of the larger plants sitting in terracotta pots looked unhappy to be so constrained, so I decided to replant them in one of the sparser borders. I grabbed a shovel and began digging a hole, focusing on the burn in the back of my shoulders.

*Dig, heave, pile the dirt. Dig, heave, pile the dirt.*

I slipped into the rhythm until a cleared throat had me stopping.

“Mistress digs a big hole,” Mosswhistle observed.

I stopped, leaning on the shovel. I’d lost track of time. Never mind a few shrubs—the hole was so large, I could have replanted a fully grown tree in it.

I gave a small smile, brushing tendrils of hair out of my face with the back of my arm. “It is rather large, isn’t it? I should probably have stopped a while back.”

Mosswhistle bounced from foot to foot. “If Mistress is finished...she has a visitor at the front door. A *fae* visitor.”

Something squirmed in my gut, like I’d swallowed a mouthful of worms. “Is it him?”

“It looks like him...” Mosswhistle began, and I bolted back inside the cottage.

I hurried through the warm rooms to the front door, not sure what I was going to do when I opened it. The brownie trotted behind me, tugging at my skirts. “But it’s *not* him.”

I stared down at Mosswhistle for a fraction of a second, my hand on the doorknob. I opened it inward.

Ferne stood there, dressed in Forest Court greens and golds, holding a single red rose between his thumb and forefinger.

“It’s rude to keep a prince waiting,” he drawled. “Especially one who comes bearing gifts.”

My heart pounded against my ribcage, and I wasn’t sure whether it was relief or disappointment.

Ferne looked so similar to Thorne. Shorter and slighter, with less angular features, but the same dark hair and piercing eyes...

“In human culture, it’s rude to turn up at someone’s home unannounced,” I retorted, not moving from the doorway.

“What’s *rude* is my dearest brother dragging me away from my

bedfellows at the crack of dawn and insisting I deliver this rose to his estranged mate.”

Ferne held out the flower. It was perfect, its velvet petals blood red.

The rich, floral fragrance turned my stomach.

I’d told Thorne I wanted to be left alone, and he’d agreed. Sending his brother to check up on me was just a fae trick to go back on his word.

“I don’t want it,” I said coldly.

Ferne just shrugged. “Pity. It’s lovely. But it will look just as lovely on me.” He tucked the rose into his buttonhole.

Blood boiling, I moved to close the door.

“Thorne sent me,” the fae said loudly, “because he thought you might like to know what happened to Vanna and Morven.”

I froze, the door half-closed. A pounding sounded in my ears.

It might be an excuse to get me to talk to Ferne...but I still wanted to know what had happened to my friends. After we’d left them behind...

“They’re okay,” Ferne added in a softer voice. “Thorne got them out of the Sky Court.”

*The Sky Court?* I guessed Faolan must have returned to his palace in the skies, and taken Vanna and Morven with him.

I didn’t reply as I moved indoors, but I left the door open behind me.

Ferne stepped inside, ducking under the doorway and looking around.

“So, this is my brother’s betrothal gift.” He pursed his lips. “Not very grand, is it? More suited to the tiny Flower Folk.”

“I don’t need anything grand,” I replied, shifting over to the sink and washing the dirt from my hands.

“A queen should need *everything* grand.” Ferne flashed me a grin as he took a glass milk bottle from the breakfast table, drained it, then removed the rose from his buttonhole and tucked it into the neck of the bottle.

“No, no, no!” Mosswhistle shot over, grumbling. “That was the last of the milk! *Wasteful* prince.”

Ferne looked down at the brownie with amusement. “Well, at least you have a servant, I suppose.”

I scrubbed at the dirt beneath my nails. “Mosswhistle is a friend, not a servant.”

“Yes, *best* friend.” The brownie leaned up on tiptoes and swiped the bottle from the table, banging into Ferne’s knees purposefully as it hustled past and disappeared into the pantry.

I was glad to see the back of the rose.

“Whyever did Thorne gift you this place?” Ferne shrugged, poking around the rest of the cottage. “It’s so far from Court.”

I turned off the tap with my elbow, drying my hands on a dishcloth. “That’s the point.”

“My brother never did understand the allure of the Fae Courts.” Ferne thumbed through the coats on the rack like he was browsing at a store, then he trailed his fingers along the wall, stopping to scratch at the dark timber frames. “But what’s not to like? The best wine, the best food, the most beautiful fae...”

“Ferne,” I said sternly. “Vanna and Morven. You said you came here to tell me what happened to them.”

“Ah, yes. That,” Ferne said vaguely as his gaze continued to dart around the cottage. “Thorne went to the Sky Court right after you requested he leave you here. It took him days to discover where Faolan had hidden them. But he got them out again.” He shot me a dazzling smile. “You’ll be pleased to know they’re both recovering in the Metal Court.”

“They’re really okay?” I suddenly felt weak with relief. And if Thorne had been able to rescue them, that must mean he was okay. That he hadn’t spiraled into madness or completely lost control of himself. Maybe being apart was better for him.

“You think my brother would ever stop trying to get them out of there?” Ferne’s voice took on a sly tone. “Perhaps you’ve already forgotten how he tore around the Kingdom of Faerie when Faolan stole you away, not stopping until he’d found you at the Alder Trials.”

A ripple of guilt spread from the pit of my stomach. Thorne hadn’t given up on our friends. He’d rescued them. While I’d spent the last few weeks fretting about them and our situation, without *doing* anything.

I shot a glare at Ferne—but the prince had already jumped to his feet, disappearing out of the room.

Reluctantly, I followed after him. I wasn’t ready for company yet, especially not company as loud and *present* as Ferne, whose favorite topic of conversation seemed to be his brother. But I also didn’t want him poking around my cottage on his own.

His soft, fae footsteps pattered up the stairs and into the bedroom.

I sighed and followed, leaning against the doorframe as he reclined on my bed, splayed out like a maple leaf.

He pressed himself up to his elbows. “I suppose you made good use of this after Thorne proposed.”

Heat crept to my cheeks. “Get off of my bed, Ferne.” I turned away, my heart racing double time. I wasn’t in the mood for teasing.

Moments later, the wardrobe creaked open. “I see you’re no longer wearing any of the beautiful fae gowns I gifted you.” Ferne’s mournful voice floated out.

“I’ve been gardening,” I muttered, not bothering to raise my voice as I stomped out of the room and headed back downstairs. Let Ferne explore the cottage if he must. I just wanted to be left alone.

In the kitchen, Mosswhistle was reluctantly and loudly putting the kettle on to boil, occasionally shooting a glare toward the stairs.

“You know we’re actually very busy, Ferne,” I called up to the fae when he still hadn’t emerged from the bedroom after several minutes. I lingered by a bookshelf, grabbing books at random. Thorne had filled it with tomes on plants and medicine and a couple of almanacs. I dumped them on the table, spreading them out and pretending to read. Perhaps I could bore Ferne out of here.

“Don’t forget new book, Mistress!” Mosswhistle heaved another book onto the table with a dusty thump. I recognized it instantly. The book from the Shadow Court, with the symbol of the enchanters emblazoned on the thick spine. I hadn’t bothered to unpack my bag when I’d returned, but of course the brownie had done it for me.

I reached out and slid it closer, my fingers tracing the worn leather.

Mosswhistle scuttled upstairs.

“Out of the bath!” it screeched moments later, followed by a cackle from Ferne.

I flipped through the yellowed pages, and they creaked under my fingertips. The smell of parchment and smoke lingered on each page, dark and forbidding and yet...

“What’s that?” Ferne leaned over my shoulder.

“A book.” I fanned him away, and he dropped into the chair opposite, crossing one leg over the other and flapping his lips as he exhaled.

I continued leafing through the book.

“Where’s the tea, brownie?” he called. “I thought brownies were supposed to be dutiful in serving guests?”

“Tea is for Mistress, not intruder.” Mosswhistle clanged the kettle hard

and muttered a string of squeaky curses under its breath.

Ferne planted his chin in both hands. “I know you’re just pretending to read.”

“Am not.”

I stopped skimming and began actually reading, leaning closer to the book. The ink was faded and old, the lettering elaborate, which made the swirling calligraphy hard to read.

Ferne babbled on, and Mosswhistle chimed in. Their squabbling voices faded from hearing as I leaned closer, hardly daring to breathe as I took in the words on the page before me.

My fingers went numb, tingling, my hands trembling as I turned the page.  
*This can’t be true.*

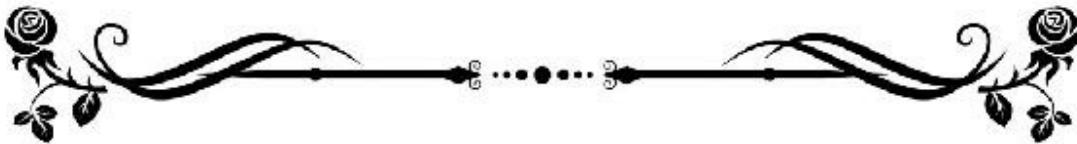
My head roared with the words I was reading.

*If this is true...*

“Aster!” I looked up to see Ferne’s face, serious for the first time since he’d arrived. Mosswhistle was at my side, looking up at me with wide, black eyes.

“This says...” I stared back down at the page. “This says enchanter have fae blood.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



I COULDN'T SEEM to catch my breath.

What I'd just read... If it was true...

It meant I had fae blood running through my veins.

*This changes everything.*

I slowly lowered my book onto my lap, the pages rustling as my hands shook.

"Mistress is ill?" Mosswhistle squeaked, the brownie's wild hair bobbing up in front of me. It clambered up the back of the chair and rested a hot, gnarled hand on my forehead. "Looks pale."

Ferne swept closer, a stifling scent of perfumed rosewood washing over me as he bent lower, perfect brow creased in a frown. "Did something happen to you in the Shadow Court that no one told me about—a hit on the head?"

I trembled furiously, shock still coursing through my veins.

"Away!" Mosswhistle let out a furious squawk, batting its hands at the tall Court Fae, trying to shoo Ferne away from me. "Mistress is unwell!"

Ferne just swatted it impatiently aside. "Aster, what you're saying isn't possible." His hand hovered between us, as though uncertain about mimicking Mosswhistle's concerned gesture. "You're not making any sense. Are you unwell?"

I did feel a bit faint.

"I... I need some air," I managed. I couldn't seem to muster any expression, the panic numbing my cheeks, my forehead. "I can't..."

Ferne straightened, disbelief washing over his face. "If you wanted me to leave, you could have just said so."

"Prince hears Mistress!" Mosswhistle hopped onto the arm of my chair,

hands planted on its hips as it turned sternly to Ferne. “Takes her outside.”

Ferne’s gaze swept to the brownie. “What—you expect me to carry her?”

Mosswistle let out a sound that was somewhere between a hoot and a click. “Hurry, hurry!”

I hugged the book to my chest. “I just need an arm—”

As though determined to do the exact opposite of whatever I asked, Ferne swooped in, lifting me delicately from my chair so that I was cradled in his arms. “Hollow hills, Aster, you need to lay off the honey cakes while you’re here.”

I didn’t laugh. A strange thumping sounded in my ears, and my entire body was ice-cold. I didn’t have it in me to move, not even to lift my head.

I wanted to carry on reading, but that first passage had turned my world upside down, made me question everything I knew about myself...about my family. My future with Thorne.

Ferne sighed and shifted me higher, sweeping through the cottage. “It’s a good thing Thorne’s not here,” he muttered. “He’d lose that pretty head of his if he saw me carrying his mate like this.”

A flicker of irritation at the mention of Thorne cut through my shock, returning some feeling to my body.

Ferne carried me through the little kitchen and out the back door. Although we were slowly approaching the end of the winter, there was still a cold nip in the air, and I inhaled sharply as it caught in my lungs. A shiver ran between my shoulder blades.

Ferne placed me, very gently, into one of the chairs at the garden table.

I leaned back against the wood and set the book on the tabletop before curling my fingers around the edge of the table, grasping it tightly. Sensation slowly seemed to be returning to me, the feel of dry wood beneath my palms, heat flooding my chest.

“Mosswhistle,” I murmured, “could you fetch me some tea? Valerian, I think...”

“At once, Mistress!”

Ferne delicately seated himself in the chair opposite me, then crossed one leg over the other and leaned back, fingers drumming on the arms of the chair. “So.” He spoke with a kind of exaggerated patience. “Tell me. What is it that you think you’ve read in this book—a book that you found in a tiny cottage library...”

Again, the irritation that flickered through me did an excellent job of

dispelling my shock. Ferne couldn't have communicated his disbelief any more clearly if he'd tried.

"It's not from the cottage." Glaring at him, I moved my hands to the book and opened it again, flipping back through the pages to find the words that had shaken me to my core. That had the power to change *everything*. "It's from the Shadow Court. I found it in the abandoned tower where the scepter was hidden."

"The Shadow Court? Spooky." Ferne let out a low chuckle.

Slowly, I smoothed a hand over the parchment, my gaze skimming the inked sentences for the section that had struck me dumb just moments ago.

I stopped suddenly, jabbing one finger against the page.

I re-read the passage slowly, not wanting to have made a mistake.

But I hadn't.

I blew out a breath and sank back into my chair. "This book... It's a history of the fae. And of humans."

Ferne shrugged. "Anything you want to know about that, I can tell you."

I resisted the urge to snap. *Typical fae arrogance.*

"The Forest Court is well-versed in fae history," he said loftily, catching the look on my face. "We have some of the finest writers in all of Faerie in our Enchancers' Guild. As well as producing new texts, they also catalog those that have come before."

I glared at him. "I'm sure you do, Ferne. But this history concerns the time *before* there were Courts. It's ancient history."

Ferne's confident expression flickered. "What...are you talking about?"

My eyes fell back to the book, and the drumming in my chest grew louder again, reverberating through my body. "Before Faerie was divided into the different Courts...it was united into one. The First Court."

Ferne was shaking his head again. "There have always been multiple Courts."

My lips pinched together before I forced myself to draw a breath. "I'm just reading what it says here."

Ferne leaned back in his chair, shoulders tensing. "And what else does it say?"

"The First Court was created when a fae king and a human queen ruled together for the first time, bringing all the subjects of Faerie, human and fae, together under one rule."

Ferne scoffed, and I shot him another glare before continuing. "There's a

map. It shows the First Court was based in the area where the Folkwood is now... It says it was the source of all the fae magic in the land." I hissed in a breath. "Of course, even now, the Folkwood isn't part of any Fae Court."

I'd never stopped to wonder why the Folkwood wasn't claimed by any of the existing Fae Courts. I'd assumed it was because of its isolated location. But clearly there was more to its history.

Ferne was back to shaking his head, but I ignored him, speaking half to myself now, trying to process all that I was reading. "And here's the bit I read before." I ran my finger along the lines of text. "The fae king and human queen had three children together—and they were all powerful enchanters." I looked up. "*That's* why enchanters can use magic. Because they've got fae blood. They can't draw their magic from the land, like you do, but their *human* blood allows them to use Craft, and so they can draw on magic that way, instead... What is it?"

I trailed off nervously. Ferne was staring at me intently, his mouth pressed into a humorless line.

"Your eyes, Aster," he said. "Has anyone ever told you that they're very...fae?"

I swallowed. "It's come up a few times, actually..."

*It all makes sense now.*

Unnerved, I wrapped my arms around myself. "Is that how it's possible...for Thorne and me to develop a mating bond?" I asked tentatively. I couldn't meet Ferne's eyes. I still wasn't sure I was ready to talk to someone else about this yet, the reason I had come to the cottage in the first place.

"I don't know," Ferne said slowly. The mocking disbelief he'd greeted me with originally had completely faded from his tone. "It's possible. The bond is magical, so it makes sense that it would need both of you to have magic in your blood, I suppose."

Rowdon had developed a bond with Eila. And Eila had been the daughter of an enchantress, so she would have had fae blood, too...

And if the bond could form in the first place between a human with fae blood and a full-blooded fae, then it stood to reason the bond could be accepted, too...

Ferne waved an impatient hand. "Keep reading—maybe it says something about it."

I carried on. "Like I said, the King and Queen of the First Court had three

children. Each used a different Craft. With their direct fae parentage, they were incredibly powerful enchanters. One had power over bone, one over glass, and one over metal..." My voice rose a pitch as I realized what I was reading. "*They* created the Alder Regalia. The crown, the orb, and the scepter. Using the materials they gathered within the First Court, where the fae magic of the land had been most powerful, ensured that the fae would respond to them as true objects of Faerie." I paused for a moment, reading ahead. "They were created because of an opposition to humans and fae coming together—as a way of ensuring that a fair rule would go unchallenged. Because three such powerful objects, created by Craft, would serve as a reminder of what humans could bring to the throne."

I sank back in my chair, thinking hard. "The statues we found in the Shadow Court..." I said slowly. "I couldn't tell whether they were human or fae. If they were the early enchanters, perhaps that's why..."

Perhaps the statue holding the scepter had been modeled after one of the first three enchanters. I looked up sharply at Ferne, something occurring to me. "Do you think the Shadow Court knows any of this history?"

Ferne shrugged, then hesitated. "What you're telling me... It's new to me. I hardly believe it. It's not common knowledge among the fae... But I've never been to the Shadow Court. They like to keep themselves shrouded in mystery."

The Shadow Court princes hadn't known about the scepter. I assumed something had happened to its original guardians that had resulted in the tower being abandoned and the knowledge being lost. Maybe the same could be said about this ancient history.

"Tea!" Mosswhistle slammed back in the garden with a shrill cry, placing a teapot and cup on the table before me with an extravagant flourish. The thick, caramel scent of valerian filled my nostrils, the liquid sloshing out of the spout.

"No cup for me?" Ferne snipped.

Mosswhistle shot him a sour look.

"Thanks, Mosswhistle," I said hastily, trying to interrupt another argument. I reached out and poured a thin, dark stream of liquid from the pot. Wrapping my fingers around the cup, I felt the heat of the drink flood into me and brought it closer.

Mosswhistle gave an over-the-top bow, then grabbed a broom leaning against the back door and began sweeping around the porch, still shooting

Ferne the occasional glare.

“So why *don’t* I know this?” Ferne said, sounding perplexed. “Why don’t *any* of the fae know this? If the Alder Regalia were created to ensure some kind of equality between humans and fae...”

I shook my head, taking a sip of the tea. “I guess it was just...forgotten over time. Or hidden.” I took another sip, blowing on the steaming liquid to cool it. “Only the enchanters in the Forest Court knew that the crown was created by Craft. Only a small number of fae in the Sea Court knew about the orb—and the Shadow Court seemed to have forgotten about the scepter since it was entrusted to them. I wonder why those Courts were chosen...”

Something about all this was niggling at the edge of my mind, like a moth battering inside a lamp. The first enchanters had created the Alder Regalia to ensure a fair rule. And they’d been able to do it because the site of the First Court—the Folkwood—was where all the magic of Faerie stemmed from. Using materials gathered there in their Craft had imbued the Alder Regalia with a power that the fae responded to...

Ferne dragged the book over, reading from it himself. “So the different Courts were established because there were different views about fae and humans ruling alongside each other. In particular, some of the fae were concerned that by watering down the bloodline, eventually enchanters would make the fae extinct...” He glanced up. “Bet I can guess which Courts held *those* views. But the Alder King or Queen kept the Alder Regalia and so ruled over all the others.” He let out an exclamation. “And *that’s* why our powers are linked to our Courts—because we draw our magic from the land, and we ended up living in one place for generations...”

I nodded vaguely, but my mind was still hung up on the first enchanters. On how they’d made the Alder Regalia to establish the importance of humans to Faerie. As a display of power and a reminder of humans’ right to rule.

“Oh!” Ferne shot me a pitying look. “It says here that with the Courts divided and humans moving into their own settlements, enchanters grew rarer, with fewer matches being made between fae and humans. The enchanters’ abilities were weakened with each generation having less fae blood in the line, and increasingly often bore children with no access to magic at all. So that’s why they now have to wear those stones or combine their skills to work together—to cast more powerful enchantments.”

And I was one of those enchanters. Somewhere in my family tree was a faerie ancestor—from the Shadow Court, if the Wilden lilac eyes were

anything to go by.

Ferne continued reading and muttering to himself, but I wasn't paying full attention any longer. I sipped at my cooling tea as my mind turned over everything I had just learned about enchanters and the Alder Regalia. Not only did this change the possibilities for Thorne and me...but the inkling of a much bigger plan began stirring.

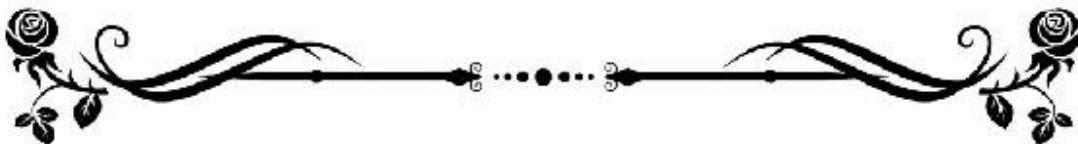
One which I thought meant we could still challenge Faolan for the throne, even though he'd taken the crown, the orb, and the scepter.

"Mistress is scheming," Mosswhistle said shrewdly, setting its broom aside.

Ferne looked up in surprise, his gaze darting between the brownie and me.

"Ferne," I murmured, setting my cup back on the table with a clatter. "You can fetch Thorne now. Tell him that I'm ready to talk."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



THORNE STOOD in front of the fireplace, a dark shadow before the flickering warm light of the flames. The room hummed with the force of his magic, the taste of it thick on my tongue.

A shiver ran down my arms. Perhaps it was having been apart for weeks—emotionally, as well as physically—but it had been a while since I’d seen Thorne as really *fae*. My gaze traced the elegant lines of his body, the lithe, predatory way that he held himself. He was so tall that I had to tilt my chin to see his eyes.

His hot, unyielding gaze bored into me, not so much as blinking. He looked terrible. His eyes were bloodshot, sunken with shadows. And there was a question sitting behind them, although he remained silent.

When I’d sent Ferne to fetch Thorne, I’d asked him to relay everything I’d discovered in the book. To tell him that the first enchanters were the children of fae and humans who had ruled alongside one another. That had changed everything for me—and it would change everything for Thorne, too.

His throat bobbed, then he tugged at the cuff of his sleeve...and in that moment he suddenly seemed less of a predator and more the male I had come to know over the past year. The male I had come to love.

The beat of my heart sped up at that thought, an anxious patter I knew his fae hearing would pick up on. I suddenly regretted sending Mosswhistle away with Ferne for the evening. There was no one here to distract from the tension running between us.

“I have a plan,” I said quickly.

Thorne’s eyebrows shot up, although he didn’t say anything.

“Ferne told you what I discovered in the book we stole from the Shadow

Court tower?”

He gave a slight nod of the head, his grip tightening on the mantelpiece.

“Well, then you know that the first enchanters made the Alder Regalia. They used the materials from the site of the First Court—the Folkwood. The book says that’s where fae magic originated, which is probably one of the reasons those enchantments are so powerful.”

Thorne still didn’t respond, his eyes following my every movement, his breathing shallow.

A flicker of excitement cut through the nerves bubbling in my chest.

“I think I can do the same.” I exhaled sharply, the plan tumbling from my lips. “The First Court got it wrong, Thorne. They made a crown for the fae monarch—but by not making one for the human monarch who sat alongside them, it was too easy for the fae to forget that humans were rulers as well as Craftsmen. But if we go back to Rosehill, where I can source materials from the Folkwood—”

“Hollow hills, Aster!”

I startled as Thorne suddenly moved from his stationary position, prowling back and forth between the fire and shooting me furious, wounded looks as he paced.

I swallowed. “You don’t think it’s a good idea?”

He drew in a ragged breath, shadows dancing over the angular planes of his face. “Put me out of my misery. Tell me what you’re thinking about *us*. Faolan can wait.”

My mouth went dry. “I—”

He took a slow step closer. “When Ferne told me what you’d found out, I allowed myself to hope...”

My stomach hollowed out, my mind slowing as the heat of his body reached mine, his familiar scent of smoke and rosewood filling the room.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about the bond as soon as I realized it myself. But I was terrified that it would hurt you one way or another.”

A confusing mix of emotions surged through my veins—the thrill of my new plan, the discovery of my fae ancestry, the heady heat still building within me to have Thorne so close and yet so far.

My blood thrummed. I took a slow step closer, one hand already half reaching for him.

“Thorne,” I said, my voice coming out small and tinny. It felt like my heart was tugging me forward, and I stumbled toward him. “I love you,” I

choked out. “And no matter how difficult things get—I want to be with you. Always.”

He still didn’t reach out for me, though his pupils dilated, eyes widening fractionally. “What are you saying, Aster?”

“I’m saying that I have fae blood. And that changes things.”

Thorne didn’t tear his searing gaze away from mine.

“I...want to accept the bond.”

Thorne let out a low growl. “We don’t know for sure it won’t hurt you.”

“My ability to enchant comes from my fae blood. I know that now. I channel fae magic from the earth through my Craft. You’ve seen what I’ve done, what magic I’ve wielded in the past. I can handle your magic, too. I know I can.”

Thorne just stared at me, his jaw slack.

“I could never reject a bond with you. And the longer we leave it one-sided, the more you’ll deteriorate. I want you by my side. I *need* you by my side.” My voice caught, and I held out my hands to him. “Our bond may not be conventional, but we’ll make it work. We’ve come through worse trials than this.”

Thorne grasped my hands in his. “You’re—you’re sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything,” I replied. The heat from his palms sank into mine and spread throughout my body. “How do I accept the bond? A vow? A kiss?” The tips of my ears heated as my mind ran away with me. “Something...more than a kiss?”

Thorne held my hands tightly. “We exchange tokens with a verbal offer. Accepting the token seals the bond. It can be anything, although usually it’s something meaningful.”

I let go of Thorne’s hands, sweeping my gaze around the cottage. I couldn’t give him a cushion or a candlestick. My mind settled on a much better idea.

“Wait here.” I disappeared into the kitchen and returned with the red rose Ferne had brought earlier. The one Mosswhistle had stored in the pantry.

If there was one thing that symbolized our love...our connection...it was this. I held it out to Thorne, my fingers trembling.

“Do you accept this token?” I asked. “Will you be my mate?”

Thorne took the bloom from me, his throat bobbing. I felt no different as he clutched the rose to his chest, staring down at me. He threaded it through his buttonhole, just like Ferne had done, then patted his waistcoat, reaching

for an inside pocket.

“I’ve been carrying this with me ever since the Metal Court. I was planning on giving it to you when we married...but I think perhaps it might be better offered now.”

He pulled out a ring. It was white gold, the band made up of tiny, daisy-shaped flowers, sparkling diamonds and emeralds alternating at the heart of each bloom.

“Aster.” Thorne’s voice wobbled, and he cleared his throat. “Do you accept my token and the mating bond between us?”

“Yes.” I offered him my hand, and, ever so gently, he slid the band onto my ring finger.

I gasped as a wash of hot, metallic *power* shuddered through me, almost knocking me to my knees.

I could feel him, the very essence of *Thorne*, flowing through me—like when I inhaled the scent of his magic, like when heat coursed through me as I cast an enchantment.

I staggered back as my senses sharpened, the room a richer, brighter burst of color and heat and sensation. I could hear the snap and crackle of the fire battling with the faint rustle of wind through leaves outside, smell the woodsmoke mingled with the remnants of the tea I’d been drinking before Thorne arrived.

A thousand sensations swept over me before all of my senses quickly homed in on one thing. The fae male gripping my arms, looking just as thunderstruck as I felt.

“Aster, are you okay?” His voice was rough with worry.

There had been no time to comprehend all of the new feelings flooding through me, but I knew one thing for sure. I wasn’t dying. I’d never felt more alive.

“I’m fine,” I gasped out. “More than fine, I—”

I clawed for him, my hands finding the front of his shirt, dragging him closer.

Everything was replaced by one overriding desire: *need*.

Thorne’s arms wrapped around me. For once, the heat searing a line between our bodies seemed to be coming from both of us.

He dropped his head, lips reaching my neck. His teeth grazed gently across my skin, and I let out a soft moan as he nipped at my jawline. My heart hammered harder, adrenaline shooting through me at the same time as

my limbs seemed to be growing weak.

Thorne's hands raked through my hair, tangling in my curls, before tilting my head back with a sharp tug.

I reached around him, dragging my fingers down his back.

"My mate," he whispered against my neck.

My heart flipped, and I tilted my head higher, our lips crashing together.

We kissed hungrily, the air between us charged like it never had been before.

We stumbled back, crashing into the wall, the weight of Thorne's body keeping me pinned against it.

I drew back, breathless, my cheeks burning, my head reeling. My elbow throbbed where I'd banged it against the wall, but the pain was insignificant. All that mattered was this closeness. Getting closer.

I pulled him toward the sofa, tugging him down.

"Upstairs. Now," Thorne ground out.

But it would take too long to get upstairs. I tugged him closer again, feeling the hard press of his body against mine, that same overriding *need* casting every other thought from my mind. I stretched up on tiptoes, my lips meeting with the skin at the base of his throat, and he let out a low growl.

He lurched back. "No, I want you upstairs. In bed. Away from interfering brownies or unannounced guests. Where we won't be interrupted all night."

*In bed. All night.*

With some effort, I drew back. Feeling almost feverish, I entwined my fingers through his. "You know, the human custom is for her mate to carry her into their new home..."

"Oh, really..."

I let out a low, breathy laugh as Thorne swept me up into his arms and shadowed us away in a curl of smoke.



We lay in a tangled, crumpled heap on the bed, my body still pressed against Thorne's. He'd dragged a light sheet over us before we'd—eventually—fallen asleep, and now I could feel the soft weave of the cotton brushing against my bare skin, pleasantly cool.

I shivered. Whatever channel the mating bond had opened up between

Thorne and me, I was still very much aware that my experience of the world had...changed. Grown richer.

Was this how the fae felt everything?

Somehow, though, it wasn't overwhelming. Just different. I leaned over and traced my fingers idly over his chest. I wasn't tired, that metallic sweep of magic still charging my body with an urge to get as close to Thorne as I possibly could.

His eyes remained closed, but his lips curved up, a rumble of pleasure rippling through his body.

"Morning, petal," he murmured.

I snuggled against him. "Morning, beast."

He wrapped an arm around me, tugging me closer. Amusement danced in his voice. "You haven't called me that in a while."

I tapped him on the nose. "Perhaps you deserve it."

His face turned serious. "And you're still feeling okay?"

"More than okay." I laughed, then paused before answering seriously. "It feels...nothing like I thought it would. Everything's different—not just how I feel about you, I mean."

"Go on?" He sounded curious.

I considered, twisting my new ring around my finger. "My senses are sharper. I can hear every faintest rustle of the leaves outside. The scurry of the Little Folk through the trees. I can smell the rain clinging to the window and the *type* of wood of the bedframe. It feels like raw sensation is dancing over my skin." I hesitated. "Is that because we share magic now?"

Thorne blew out a slow breath. "I don't know, petal. It could be. But I've never seen a mated human and fae before. I have no idea how all of this will work...or what, exactly, we'll share." He hugged me closer. "But if you think your human senses have sharpened to be more like fae ones, that sounds promising. Maybe you will be able to use something of my magic, in time. I'm just glad that you're well."

I chewed my lip. The thought of possessing fae powers would have seemed unthinkable to me a year ago. But now that I had my enchanting magic, it didn't seem quite so crazy.

We lay still for a moment, my mind wondering what it meant for us to be joined in this way—not just how it would intensify what we felt for one another, but how powerful we could be, a fae prince and a human enchantress, now that we were joined by a mating bond. It was strange to *feel*

it, in my body, a kind of new charge. It was unsettling. Like I needed to learn to be myself all over again.

“If I *can* channel fae magic, I wonder if I’ll share fae weaknesses too, like iron and salt? I’d hate to have to start speaking the truth all the time...”

Thorne trailed his fingers along my arm. “We’ll figure it out together.”

I looked up at him, resting my chin against his chest. It might just be my new mating bond talking, but...he looked more handsome than ever. The tenseness that had been present in his every expression, every muscle, had melted away. Instead, he glowed...even more than usual. “And how’re you?” I inquired. “Are you feeling...better?”

“More than I ever thought possible.” He ran his fingers through my hair, smiling down at me. “I have my mate wrapped in my arms, safe. A mate who I get to worship like a queen. What more could I want?”

My lips tugged up, and I pressed away from his chest. “How about a mate who has an idea that’ll help us beat Faolan? I’m not sure how much you were paying attention yesterday.” I gave him a pointed look. “But I’ve decided the humans need a crown, too.”

Thorne’s expression turned serious. Rolling onto his side to face me, he propped himself up on an elbow. “You really think you’re powerful enough to make one to rival the Alder Crown?”

I feigned indignation, torn between wanting to go over the plan I’d made, which we’d abandoned talking about yesterday, and not wanting to break the spell of being just two people in bed, waking together for the first time. “You doubt I can?”

“Aster, you’re the most powerful enchantress I’ve ever encountered. You defeated Yvette when you’d barely been trained. You defeated the heirs to every Fae Court to win the Alder Trials. Hollow hills—you Crafted a gift worthy of a dragon’s favor.”

Heat rose to my cheeks.

“If any enchanter is capable of crafting a new crown, then it’s you. But...”

“But?” I demanded.

He yawned widely, then sighed. “But maybe *no* enchanter is capable of doing that. The Alder Crown contains the power of countless fae kings and queens.”

“But the First Court enchanters—”

“Were the direct children of a fae and a human. Their magic will have

been far stronger than any enchanter living today. If I understood Ferne correctly, it's fae blood that gave enchanters their powers."

"And human Craft."

Thorne inclined his head in acknowledgement. "And human Craft," he repeated. "But it must have been generations ago that you had fae blood in your line."

I remained silent a moment, turning this over. He was right, of course. Who knew when fae blood had entered my family line, but it wasn't recently. I'd told Thorne myself that my lilac eyes were inherited from my father—and he was the most un-fae-like human you'd ever meet.

But still, there was something else...

"Being mated to you," I said slowly. "If I really do share in your magic. Might that give me the power I'd need to do it?"

Thorne stiffened, then forced a laugh. "Don't tell me that's the only reason you accepted the bond."

I swatted him with the back of my hand. "I accepted the bond because I *love* you." I leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss across his lips. I lingered a moment...but couldn't help myself. "Still... Do you think I'm right?"

Thorne let out a low laugh. "You're incorrigible."

I grinned. "But you're stuck with me now, remember? And your *queen* just asked you a question."

Thorne nodded slowly, although a frown settled over his brow again. "You could be right..." Reluctance stained his voice.

"But?" I demanded.

"But it's risky, Aster. We don't know that you can do it. Just like we don't know if making it at the site of the First Court will imbue it with the same level of power. We'd need to be absolutely sure it would compel the other fae to listen to you...and to make sure Faolan doesn't kill you first. And everything in me, every fae instinct—the mating bond—is telling me to protect you right now."

I slowly lowered myself onto my back beside him. "What's the worst that could happen?" I joked.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied lightly. "Faolan sending Sky Court armies to Rosehill and somehow stealing you away from me yet again." A cold brittleness crept into his tone, the humor fast fading. "The Shadow Court controlling our friends, our families."

I shivered, recalling what we had seen in the Shadow Court. "Ferne said

you rescued Vanna and Morven. He said they were both okay.”

A low thrum ran through Thorne’s body as he gave a curt nod. “They’ll recover. But Vanna... I still don’t know exactly what she went through in the Sky Court. She was talking about the dreams she experienced while she was under the Shadow Court’s control.” The fury contained in his voice was like ice. “She seemed to think there was something *real* about them... She said that Lonan had been there, inside her dreams... Folk know what kind of shadow magic *he* has...”

*Lonan.* I shivered at the memory of the horned prince who had bound me in shadows, who had watched his brothers tear into Thorne with a cold smile on his face. “You fought him off?”

Thorne shifted beside me. “His power is...significant. But he was elsewhere when I found Vanna and Morven in the Sky Court.” He blew out a breath. “The Metal and the Mountain Courts are now ready to charge into battle.” He shook his head. “What Faolan and Lonan did... It goes against just about every agreement that exists across Faerie.”

We fell into silence. Thorne’s hands had bunched into fists, those tell-tale shadows eking from them, while I couldn’t stop the wild thoughts running through my mind.

“Thorne,” I whispered softly. “What Faolan and those shadow princes did to Vanna and Morven. This is exactly why we have to make a new crown and overthrow Faolan. Why we have to at least *try*.”

Thorne exhaled very slowly. “I know,” he said in a quiet voice.

My heartbeat ratcheted up a notch. “You mean...you agree?”

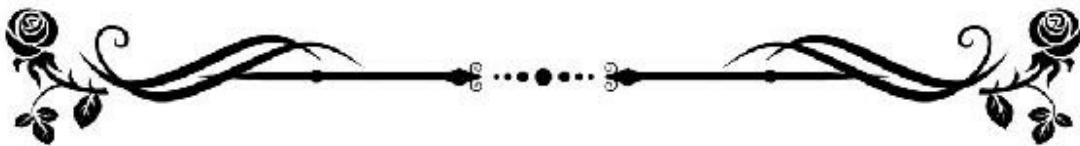
Thorne rolled onto his back, not looking me in the eye. “We’ll go to Rosehill,” he promised. “And you... You can try. To make a crown that will challenge the Alder Regalia.” He swallowed. “I will help you in whatever way I can...no matter what.”

A flicker of fear and excitement ran through me.

“I think it will work,” I whispered, enchantments already dancing before my eyes. I needed to finish reading the book properly, but I was sure of it—using the materials of the Folkwood, the site of the First Court, I would enchant a crown that would mimic the power of the Alder Crown.

It was time to go home.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



I STARED at Rosehill in the distance, misty rain gathering around the town like a halo in the early morning light. I hadn't been back since Ava had been faesick, almost half a year ago.

It felt familiar and yet different. Perhaps it was because I could smell everything so keenly—the smell of woodsmoke from the distant chimneys, the scent of magnolia drifting over the houses, the musk of sheep from the fields.

Or perhaps it was because *I* was different.

In Rosehill, everyone knew me. I was an important member of the town. I'd had a job here as their greenwitch. But since the Tithe...everything had changed. Now, I returned with a fae title, a fae mate, and the knowledge that at least some fae blood ran in my family's veins.

I still hadn't decided whether I would tell them.

Thorne squeezed my hand. "Need more time?" He'd been waiting patiently at my side while I stared toward the town that somehow would always be home and yet now would never be home again.

I shifted my satchel on my shoulder, stifling a yawn with my sleeve as I turned to him. I blushed as I remembered last night—*all* of the sleepless nights since I'd accepted the mating bond.

I'd taken a few more days in the cottage to study the book I'd stolen from the Shadow Court, to figure out what I needed to make a new crown...but it hadn't exactly been difficult to be stuck in a confined space with Thorne for that time. Even if it had been...distracting.

"Tired?" Thorne grinned, as if he could read my mind. Perhaps with our newly forged bond, he could.

“No need to look so pleased about it.” I swatted his chest playfully, gazing up at him from the corner of my eyes. The fine mist clung to his dark hair, his lashes. Silver bells, he was beautiful. Somehow, he looked even more beautiful here on the outskirts of my little town, with flat fields and boxy farmhouses dotted around us. He didn’t look tired at all, even though he’d gotten just as little sleep as I had.

“Are you ready?” I asked. “The people of Rosehill are going to be wary of a fae stepping into town.” It was just a few hours after sunrise, but there would be early risers about. I was surprised we hadn’t bumped into any of the farmhands already.

“Even if I’m with their greenwitch?”

I paused. “I’m not their greenwitch anymore.” It was surprisingly painful to say it. “Besides, you’ll have to meet the rest of my family....”

When Laurel had come to the Cursed Court, she hadn’t taken too kindly to meeting my captor, who she still believed was a girl-stealing, possibly flesh-eating, monstrous beast.

I wondered whether the townsfolk now believed the true story. The Tithe girls from previous years had never returned, and I had never come back again after I cured the faesick girls. What proof did they have that it was truly over, other than my word? I might still have a battle on my hands. I hoped we wouldn’t have to face the townsfolk crowding around our house with pitchforks and flaming torches...

We made our way down the track toward the walled center of town. The same road where I’d fought the dullahan all those months ago.

“You know, I visited Rosehill once before,” Thorne reminded me. “When I was looking for you. I met your father.”

I’d forgotten that. “You never told me how that went.”

Thorne gave a half-smile. “Let’s just say he liked me even less than your sister did.”

I snorted. “Well, just so you know, Laurel’s the friendlier of my two sisters.”

Thorne arched an eyebrow. “We’ve yet to have an interaction without her holding an arrow pointed at me.”

I gave him a weak smile. “Maybe today will be the day.”

Or maybe it would be the day the whole town surrounded us with bows and arrows.

My heart quickened as we stepped through the town gates. I was equal

parts excited and nervous to see my family again.

On the one hand, my heart ached to be reunited with Laurel and my father, even Ava. But on the other... What would they make of me now? Had Ren told them everything? I'd seen them talking to the Flower Court heir when I'd accidentally summoned a vision of them in the Alder Orb.

The town gates were wide open, the mud churned from carts and hooves and footprints. No one stood guard, but, as we walked through, the metallic taste of iron slid across my tongue.

My gaze shot to the metal bands embedded in the wood.

Thorne tensed slightly beside me.

Would I have noticed that before? We were so attuned to each other's movements and moods now.

I wished we had time to explore what it truly meant for an enchantress and a fae to be bonded like this. But my plan to make a new crown couldn't wait.

As we entered Rosehill, chickens scattered, clucking indignantly as we approached them. Horses neighed, and voices swelled in the distance. The town was awake.

We reached the edge of the main square. Although it wasn't market day, people walked briskly to and fro with laden baskets, others bartered from windows, and several of the town's young men were on ladders hanging bunting that swayed damply in the morning breeze. The smell of cooked breakfast hung in the air.

"What's that for?" Thorne nodded toward the bunting being draped across the town square.

"No idea. Maybe a wedding?" I pulled Thorne along one of the quieter backstreets. "Come on, this way." I knew every road and alley in Rosehill like my own back garden. I didn't want to draw a crowd until I knew where we stood with the town.

I headed straight for my father's house, leading Thorne through the backstreets by the hand until a wonky, timber-framed building greeted us at the end of the street.

I'd helped my father with his accounts before and knew that, with his money, he could live in one of the fancy manor houses in the center of town, where Lady Cicely and Ava lived. Instead, he chose to live here, in the more modest outer part of town, close to the rest of his crew and the Golden Hare.

My heart leaped to my throat as I raised my hand to knock, but the door

flew open. Laurel's narrowed eyes widened in shock when she saw me standing before her.

“Aster!” She threw her arms around me, pinning my own to my sides.

“Oomph,” was all I could muster in her bone-crushing embrace.

“I missed you,” she murmured into my hair. Then she pulled back, gripping me by the shoulders and holding me at arm’s length. “Are you okay? Why are you here?” She glanced up at Thorne. “I see you’re still keeping terrible company.”

“I see you’re as charming as ever, huntress,” Thorne replied wryly.

Laurel ignored him, turning back to me. Her hair was braided back in a long plait, and she was dressed in brown plaid trousers with a loose shirt. As casual as it got for Laurel.

“Come in, come in.” She ushered me into the hall. “Everyone’s in the kitchen.”

“Who’s everyone?” I frowned back at Thorne.

“Everyone,” she repeated, wafting a hand around vaguely. “We’re planning for the Spring Equinox festival.” Her gaze found me again, her eyebrows raised. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten the date of the Spring Equinox.”

I blinked. In the Fae Courts, I’d had no way of knowing how much time had passed. I hadn’t realized we were almost ready to greet the spring.

“It’s the first year of no Tithe,” Laurel continued slowly, her tone implying I was an idiot. “I know you’ve been away, sis, but you remember the Tithes, right? A beast stole a girl every year.” She glared at Thorne. “They were a pretty big deal around here.”

I adopted her patronizing tone, “Oh, yes, *now* I recall.”

“This year, the town council has arranged for the festival to be bigger than ever—as a memorial to all of the lost girls. There’s going to be celebrations all week, then on the equinox there’ll be a big bonfire, and food, and we’re all wearing white...” She paused to throw open the kitchen door with a flourish. “Surprise! Aster’s here.”

I didn’t even get a look into the room before my father was in the doorway, crushing me to him just as Laurel had, his bristly beard scratching my forehead.

“My favorite youngest daughter.” He gave a deep laugh, squeezing me so tight I thought he might lift me off the ground completely.

“Hi, Dad.” I squeezed him back, for a moment forgetting why I was here.

It was good to be just that for a moment. Birk's daughter.

He broke away, one hand still resting on my back. "This calls for a round of drinks to celebrate!"

"It's nine in the morning, Birk," chided Rina from where she sat at the dining table, nursing a thick ceramic mug of steaming coffee.

My father released me enough so I could take in the rest of his room. Three of his crew were here, and, to my surprise, Ava lingered in the corner of the room, too. A long, midnight-blue cloak was draped around her shoulders, as if she had just arrived—or was just about to leave.

"Hi, Ava." I gave her a smile, knowing there would be no hugs between us. There never were.

"I'm surprised the so-called Queen of Faerie could make time in her busy schedule to associate with us mere humans," she said loftily.

She'd had no lasting effects from the faesickness, then.

She folded her arms. "To what do we owe this pleasure?"

Before I could answer, a broad body blocked my view of her.

"Aster!" Layton made a beeline for me, his blond hair tied back in its usual low ponytail, an eager expression on his face. "You're back!"

For one worrying moment, it looked like he might try to envelop me and Dad in a group hug, but then Thorne stepped through the doorway.

Silence filled the room.

Dad stepped back, tilting his head up to appraise Thorne.

"Mr. Wilden," Thorne said, unusually respectful as he stepped closer to my side.

Layton paled and changed direction almost immediately, pulling up a chair at the table and sitting on it awkwardly, foot tapping at the ground.

"The green faery said you found my daughter at a *Sky Court*," Dad said carefully, as if he'd memorized the words. "I take it I have you to thank for her safe return."

Thorne raised a brow. "I found her, Mr. Wilden, but it turned out Aster didn't really need rescuing."

My father considered this, then slapped me on the back with a hoot. "Well, of course she didn't—she's a Wilden."

"So why *are* you back?" Ava interrupted. "Are we supposed to believe you've given up your life of fae luxury to visit for a town festival?"

*Life of fae luxury?*

Laurel sat on the edge of the table, leaning back and swinging her legs.

“Maybe if you let her draw breath in between snipes, sister dearest, Aster’ll actually get a word in.”

All eyes turned to me. Silver bells, this tiny kitchen was not meant to hold so many people.

“Aster, do you want eggs?” Orrin turned from where he was scrambling eggs in an enormous frying pan.

“Sure,” I said with a warm smile.

“And your...” He trailed off, turning wary eyes to Thorne, who was so tall, he was stooping slightly so as not to knock his head on the beam.

“No, thank you,” Thorne declined.

I looked around the room. It had been abuzz with action when I’d arrived. But not the kind of restless preparation before something bad happened—everyone seemed content and happy.

Had I been the same when I lived in Rosehill, protected by swaths of forest from the rest of the Fae Courts, our only worry the immediate threat of the Folkwood and the annual Tithe? How much had Ren told them of what was going on in the outside world?

From Ava’s patronizing comments, I gathered Ren had filled them in that I was the Queen of Faerie, but they were treating me no differently than if I’d announced I’d been chosen as May Queen in Rosehill’s Beltane celebrations.

“How are the enchantments at the edge of the Folkwood?” I began as someone pressed a mug of steaming coffee into my hands.

“They’ve held fine.” Dad hustled at the side cabinet, and Layton had to lean back to avoid being elbowed in the face. The sound of clinking glasses told me my father was taking this round of drinks seriously.

“No attacks on your runs?” I continued.

“We held off on our supply runs since your little green friend came to warn us we might be in danger.” Dad squinted at the label on a bottle. “But we’ve not heard a peep. I’m hoping your being here means we can get back to business...” He sounded hopeful. “After the amount of cake being baked ahead of Spring Equinox, our sugar stores are running dangerously low.”

“Where is Ren?” I asked, looking around for the flower heir. Had my family cast them aside because they were fae?

“They’re outside with Kay,” Laurel answered, sliding off the table and marching to the window.

Kay was one of Laurel’s closest friends. Did they have Ren trussed up? Locked somewhere?

“Hey!” she yelled out the window. “Green! There’s someone here to see you.”

“In a minute, *Red*.” Ren’s high voice floated back. “We’ve a wager going on out here.”

Laurel shrugged as she turned back to me. “They’ll be in when they’re in, I suppose.”

My father handed me a tumbler of what smelled like neat whiskey, and I wrinkled my nose. “Dad, I don’t drink.”

He continued handing out glasses, ignoring me. “This isn’t a drink, Aster —it’s a *toast*.”

“And toast is perfectly acceptable for breakfast, sis.” Laurel nudged me in the side and winked.

Thorne accepted his tumbler with a gracious nod.

“To Aster!” my father chanted. “Taken from us last Spring Equinox, fought her way back to us by the next. And Queen of Faerie, no less!” he added as an afterthought. Then, “To Queen Wilden!”

“Queen Wilden!” everyone chanted.

Everyone except Ava, who glared at us from her corner, her face a mask of seriousness as she poured the contents of the drink into the sink.

Despite the cheers and frivolity going on around us, my face probably mirrored Ava’s.

“Anyone want sausages?” Orrin called out.

“I’m not here for the festival.” I set down both my mug and my glass, raising my voice over the answering sausage requests. The merriment died down. “I don’t know what Ren has told you all, but humans in the rest of the kingdom are in danger. There’s a new fae king on the throne, and he believes humans should be slaves to the fae. I have to stop him before he creates laws even worse than the Tithes.”

“There’s a king?” Ava sneered. “I thought the beast was your chosen king. Or are you bedding multiple fae?”

Layton choked on his toast.

“Ava,” Dad growled in warning. “Be nice to your sister.”

“Thorne is my *mate*,” I replied, warmth rushing through me at the word. I had a lifetime of practice not rising to Ava’s taunts. “He will be my king when we marry, but there’s another challenger to the throne. Faolan.” I knew the name would mean nothing to them, but maybe hearing it would make it real. Everyone remained quiet, listening to me.

Sausages spat and sizzled on the skillet. “Sorry,” said Orrin, removing them from the heat.

“That’s who we’re in danger from?” Ava asked, her chin tilted high. “A fae king?”

“A pretender king,” Thorne growled.

I tucked my hair behind my ears. “Faolan knows you exist. He threatened you and Laurel once before. He might use you to get to me.” I thought of what he’d done to Mosswhistle. If he hadn’t caught the brownie, would he have tortured my sisters instead?

I looked between them, their lilac eyes so familiar to mine even between Laurel’s thoughtful, feline gaze and Ava’s pointed glare.

“Are we in immediate danger?” Laurel asked. “Is that why you’re here?”

I swallowed against my dry throat, thinking of the Alder Regalia. “Faolan wants me dead.”

“You think you’ll be safe in Rosehill?” Dad asked, adding a glug of whiskey to a mug of coffee.

I shook my head. “I need to make a new crown that’s just as powerful as the one Faolan wears. I believe I can enchant a new one here in Rosehill.”

“Why Rosehill?” a new, trilling voice cut in. Ren fluttered through the window, no bigger than my hand. In a haze of light, the fae became their full size, hovering above the wooden floor on near-invisible wings.

Ava pulled a face and shuffled farther back, fanning away the floral scent of magic that wafted around the room. Laurel shooed Layton out of his chair to make room for Ren.

“It’s a long story,” I sighed, aware everyone was listening. I didn’t want to explain the whole history of the First Court and the fae and enchanters to the whole room. My family already knew so little of the fae world—why start with this latest discovery? “I found out that the Alder Crown was created here. It’s a source of power for the fae.”

Ren’s faint-green eyebrows drew down, a serious look crossing their usually mischievous face. “I have news to report as well.” They cocked their head toward the door.

“Outside?” I confirmed. If it was bad, I didn’t want to scare my family. Ren and Thorne moved toward the back door and slipped out into the courtyard.

“You won’t have breakfast with us?” My father’s voice was a low rumble.

My heart tugged in my chest. I wanted nothing more than to sit down at the breakfast table with them.

But I was doing this *for* them.

“I’m sorry, I can’t waste any time. I’m not here for Spring Equinox, and I won’t have time to help with celebrations. I just came to check in on you before heading to my workshop.”

“Glad to hear that you think spending time with your family is *wasteful*,” Ava scowled.

I glared at my middle sister. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Better get back to your *queenly* business—”

Laurel jumped down from the table. “Oh, quit your yapping, Ava. Like you haven’t complained every day that Ren made you check in with us morning and night.”

Ava clamped her lips closed.

“You’re acting like you’ve forgotten that Aster was the one who saved you when you got faesick.”

Ava’s cheeks turned pink. “In case you all haven’t noticed, she’s one of *them* now.”

Laurel barked a laugh and flicked my rounded ears. “Oh, yeah? Let’s see. Our youngest sister returning to her greenwitch workshop, saying that she’s too busy for a town festival... That sounds *exactly* like Aster, actually.”

Ava scoffed but had no comeback. I shot Laurel a grateful smile, despite her teasing.

Dad appeared at my elbow. “I’ll bring a plate of breakfast to your workshop. And one for your...mate.” He kissed my brow. “Go do what you have to do.”

I slid through the gap in the door and out into my father’s courtyard garden. It was overgrown, the path barely visible. My father and Laurel had just left it to run wild since I’d gone. But it was familiar. I knew every plant. I’d tended most from seedlings.

A firm hand gripped my shoulder, and I turned, expecting Laurel but finding Ava.

“What?” I said in a weary tone. “Did you think of a comeback?”

She stepped out of the doorway and yanked the door closed behind her. “Sorry I’m the only one not thrilled to discover we’re in danger because some fae king wants to kill you.”

“The world is bigger than you know, Ava. And the threats are too. You

have no idea what's going on beyond Rosehill."

"Don't patronize me," my sister snapped. "Don't you think I know as well as any the dangers of the fae? I survived the Tithe to almost die of faesickness half a year later, along with all of my friends."

I gritted my teeth. "And if you remember, it was me who saved you, with the help of the fae."

"Yes, yes." She held her hands up in a mocking bow. "You saved my life twice, and now I am forever in your debt."

"You're not in my debt, Ava. You're my sister. I know we haven't always gotten along..."

Ava snorted at that.

I hesitated. "But we're blood, and I love you."

She blinked, a delicate frown creasing her brow. Then she sighed, some of the fire going out of her voice. "Before the Tithe, you warned me how silly my dreams of faerie princes were. How they were more likely to kill me than wed me. Do you remember that?"

I nodded.

"Well, you were right. From the moment I saw the Beast of the Folkwood, I saw what the fae truly were. *Killers.*" She pulled her cloak more tightly around her, glancing across the courtyard to where Ren and Thorne were standing, pretending not to listen in. "And now suddenly you're back with the very same fae prince as your *mate*." She bit out the last word.

"Ava—" I began with a sigh.

"Don't Ava me. You say that the fae of the Folkwood are dangerous and your enchantments will protect us, then you send an unknown green faery into our midst, and we're just supposed to trust them? You tell us a fae king is out to kill us all while you take another fae prince to bed? You're a hypocrite. They're *all* dangerous to us."

"It's not that simple, Ava. It's not black and white. It's not even fae and human. You say I'm a hypocrite, but you're the one condemning all fae when *you* have fae blood too, just like me and just like Laurel."

"What?" Ava flinched as if I'd slapped her.

I bit my lip. I hadn't meant for it to come out like that. I hadn't even decided if I was going to share that news with my family, let alone throw it in Ava's face in an argument.

"Is that true?" she asked coldly.

I rubbed my lips together, wondering if I should try to take it back. I

shrugged. It was out there now. “That’s why we have purple eyes. And it’s why I can Craft enchantments.”

She didn’t say anything, a range of emotions flitting across her face, each quickly stifled. She glared toward Thorne and Ren, then pushed past me, her shoulder knocking into mine. “Keep your fae *friends* well away from me, sister,” she spat, her cloak rippling behind her as she stormed out through the side gate.

Well, that could have gone better...

I approached Ren and Thorne, who stopped murmuring between themselves and looked up with sympathetic winces. Ren let out a low whistle. They’d heard our conversation, then.

“So, that was Ava,” Thorne said with a wide-eyed expression. “I guess I should thank you.”

“For what?”

“For stopping me picking her at the Tithe.”

Ren chuckled, and I reluctantly huffed a laugh. “She can be very personable when she wants something.” The half-smile dropped from my lips as I turned to the slight, green fae hovering above the ground. “Your news, Ren?”

The smile disappeared from their face, too. “I’ve heard whispers. Faolan is planning to summon the monarchs and their heirs to the Sky Court.”

“For a coronation?” I frowned. “But the crown isn’t working for him.”

Thorne shot me a glance. “Maybe now that Faolan has the other Alder Regalia, he thinks the fae will listen to him anyway.”

“The *other* Alder Regalia?” Ren quirked an eyebrow.

“There’s a lot to explain...” I smiled weakly. I returned my gaze to Thorne. “Do you think it’s enough to persuade the other Courts?”

“I don’t know.” Thorne’s brow furrowed. “But it seems like Faolan does. Perhaps he’s content to gain fealty from the rest of the kingdom until he can find you and...”

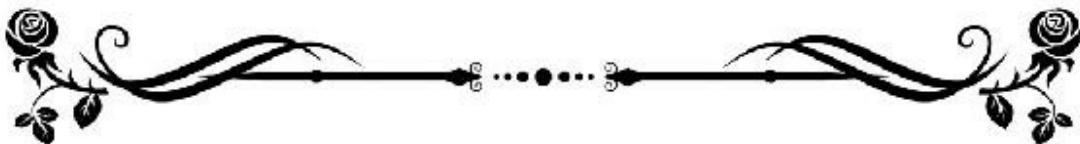
*And kill me.*

Those final words went unspoken, but they resounded through the courtyard anyway.

“Unless I stop him first,” I murmured. I bunched my fists.

It was time to make myself a crown worthy of a fae queen.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



I SURVEYED THE WORKBENCH, the medley of spring flowers in pale purples and yellows and white creating a patchwork over the wood, illuminated in the cool light flooding in through the windows. Now that I'd at last assembled the plants I wanted to use, I needed to think about what the Spring Crown should look like, how I would imbue it with power that matched the bone crown.

I shivered. Once I'd made the crown, I would have to use it to challenge Faolan. I would take this battle to him, and when I did, I had to be sure that the fae would respond to the authority of the Spring Crown—that *he* would respond to it. That he would bend to my will when I wore it.

Before he could kill me.

The enchantment on my crown would be completely different from the one on the Alder Crown. The enchanter who had made that crown had worked with bone—with death. I worked with life. The Alder Crown drew on and contained the fae power of its previous wearers, while my crown would draw its power directly from the earth. But while the enchantments would differ, the end result would be the same.

So I'd taken my time selecting the flowers before me. Knowing that I needed to weave in the strength of my own Craft as well as the magic of the Folkwood, I'd chosen some of the finest blooms from my own garden, a space that I had spent years tending with my Craft. I'd also been wandering the Folkwood with Thorne, in search of wildflowers, running carefully through flower meanings with him before picking those that would lend the most power to the crown.

I glanced over to where Thorne prowled back and forth before the

window of my workshop, pretending not to watch me work.

The tension streaking through my body eased in his presence. And that was important, too. This crown was supposed to be about love, spring, and new beginnings, the opposite in every way to the bone crown created by the first enchanters. I needed to pour the right emotions into my enchantment to make that work. It couldn't be tainted by doubt or worry or fear.

I tucked a curl behind my ear as Thorne gazed out of the window, and I focused on the swelling in my heart that I felt for him. *My mate.* It still felt so strange to think it.

It was funny, I'd seen him—or what I'd thought was him—in here before. The púca had taken his form when I'd returned to Rosehill from the Cursed Court to try to make an antidote to the faesickness that had affected so many girls in the village. It had given away my feelings for the Beast of the Folkwood to Laurel, since the púca always took the form of the person you cared about most.

With the heat I felt for Thorne flooding through my body, I reached for my seateurs—and then stopped, hand hovering in the air. They weren't there.

A wash of unease flooded over me before I forced myself to take a breath, trying to calm my emotions again.

I still thought of this as *my* workshop, and my body moved instinctively within it, even after being away for a year...only, of course, it wasn't my workshop any longer.

Ava's friend, Marcia, had taken over as greenwitch after I'd left, and this space was hers now. I noticed it in small ways... In the way that Sage's old journals were now stacked neatly on shelves instead of tumbling over the workspace, in the choice of flowers that hung drying from the ceiling, in the boots by the door that didn't fit me.

Silver bells, how was I supposed to create a crown out of love when I was so on edge?

At least the smells were the same, rich scents of old leather, fresh herbs, and earthy soil. I inhaled slowly as I lowered my hand, reminding myself that I still knew these plants intimately, even if Marcia was evidently a little more organized than I had ever been. I cast my gaze over the tools arranged neatly in tin pots along the back of the bench and extracted the seateurs.

I needed to ensure these plants would last forever, and for that I would spray them all with a tincture of chrysanthemum, a plant for long life. I'd

used it before, in the arrangements I'd made for Vanna's visit to the Cursed Court and in the wards I had set around Rosehill to keep the Folkwood at bay. But before I ensured these flowers would be everlasting, I needed to trim the leaves and the stems.

"Can I help?" Thorne's smooth voice inquired over my shoulder.

I tilted my head to see him standing very close behind me, looking intently at the sharp tool in my hand.

He cleared his throat. "You mentioned drawing on my magic for this. I haven't felt you do it."

Guilt swallowed me.

As so-called Lord of the Folkwood, it had only seemed right Thorne help me in my search for the wildflowers I would use in the crown. He'd shadowed us in and out of the Folkwood, he'd listened attentively when I'd talked through what each of the plants did, even though I knew he knew the plants of the forest as intimately as I did. He'd asked questions, curious about my Craft, about what I was doing, about me.

But he was right, I hadn't drawn on his magic, or even tried to. And I knew why.

I slowly lowered the secateurs and turned to face him.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out. "I know that if you had a fae mate...you'd *both* be able to share in each other's magic." I wrung my hands together, already stained with plant matter. "And instead... Even if I can draw on your magic, I have nothing to offer you in return."

Did he mind, not being able to help me with my Craft now? He would never know what it felt like to use the magic of another fae, a magic that extended beyond his own body—

His long fingers found my chin, tilting my head higher so that I was forced to gaze into his bright hazel eyes. "Aster... I'm not sure you fully understood my offer of help."

My brow furrowed. "You mentioned drawing on your magic. I know I haven't yet."

He nodded. "Yes, I want you to do that. The Spring Crown needs to be just as powerful as the Alder Crown. But...what if I *helped* you?"

Releasing his hold on my chin, he dropped into the chair beside me and gently took the secateurs from my hand.

My face slackened as understanding dawned.

The slightest frown lowering his brow, Thorne delicately lifted one of the

yellow winter jasmine stems. “Believe me, I am very aware I have a human mate and not a fae one. So what if I can’t share in another fae’s magic? I have enough fae magic.” He shot me a wary smile. “What if I can share in your Craft?”

“Do you think you’ll be able to?” Thorne had explained before that when fae tried to do Craft, their magic made them pass out.

Thorne shrugged. “I just have this feeling that maybe I could. I can’t explain it.”

Delight pooled in my stomach.

Reaching over, I removed the delicate jasmine from his hand and replaced it on the bench.

*Winter jasmine. For love and luck.* My gaze drifted to the frilly marigolds next to them. *For power, strength, and light—a symbol of the sun.* My lips curved up. These were two of the wildflowers I’d used in the circlet I’d made to wear to the Tithe.

Before I’d even met Thorne, these were the blooms I’d chosen for my crown. Spring flowers, which suggested the signs of the forest waking up again, of new life. I hadn’t known their significance then, but they were perfect for the crown I was crafting now, the opposite of the bone crown that compelled the fae through fear.

Of course, the Little Folk had stolen my original flower crown in the forest, when I’d gone looking for Nairn after the púca had taken him. The crown I’d ended up wearing to the Tithe had been woven from briars and nettles. Thorne had told me later that I’d unwittingly woven a curse into it...

“You don’t want my help?” Thorne interrupted my memories. He made it sound like a joke, but his voice was strained.

I flashed him a smile. “Relax, beast. We’ll make a florist of you yet. But we need to start with the bigger flowers. They’ll be what gives the crown its structure.”

My arm brushed his sleeve as I leaned past him and selected a long magnolia stem, rolling it between my thumb and forefinger. This early in the year, the flowers were only just starting to open up, still more like furled buds than the open cups they would turn into. But the meaning of this flower was important, one I definitely wanted to include.

*Magnolia. For nobility.*

“We’ll use these stems for the base,” I decided. “We’ll trim off the flowers and save them to work in later, but we want this to be the base that

holds everything else.”

Thorne extended a hand, and I passed him the stem. “Cut as close to the node as you can—that’s where the flowers are attached to the stem. It does the least damage to the plant.” Of course, that didn’t matter so much with a plant that had already been cut, but these flowers deserved our respect.

For a moment, Thorne didn’t move, weighing the plant in his hand, his fingers tight around the secateurs. Then, very slowly, he brought the secateurs up to beneath the magnolia bloom and slid them down to the node.

“Here?” He didn’t look up at me, his gaze intent on the flower in his hand.

“Perfect,” I said. I held my breath. I didn’t want Thorne to hurt himself trying Craft, but I trusted his gut feeling and understood why he wanted to try.

Thorne’s frown deepened, and then he snipped.

The magnolia bloom tumbled to the desk, the pale flower bouncing over the wooden surface until it rolled to a stop.

Thorne’s head jerked up, a beaming smile lighting his face like a ray of sunshine cutting through a forest canopy.

The fae prince could no doubt magically deadhead an entire tree of magnolias with one snap of his fingers, but this was the first time he’d used a tool to do something like this. I couldn’t prevent a grin from spreading across my own face, warmth blooming in my core.

“Perfect!” I declared. “I couldn’t have done it better myself.”

Still grinning boyishly, Thorne brought the secateurs back to a second flower and snipped again, watching the flower bouncing across the workbench.

Settling myself down beside him, I selected a long stem of magnolia myself, grabbed another pair of secateurs from Marcia’s storage, and began to work.

We worked companionably, stripping the magnolia stems of blooms, ready to weave them into a base for the other flowers. As well as the jasmine and the marigolds, I’d also selected pale-purple crocuses, a symbol of cheerfulness and spring, and ruffled white camellia, which represented destiny.

As I worked, I felt a steady heat building in my hands. There was no doubt about it. With Thorne helping, this enchantment would be spun from love.

And...there was a kind of current running between us. I tried not to look too closely at it, in case it disappeared, but I was sure of it. *This* was the mating bond. And I hoped it meant Thorne's power was running into me as I wove my enchantments, lending me a strength that the first enchanters would have had.

"I can't believe this is *Craft*," Thorne muttered. He was working more slowly than I was, being painstakingly careful with each cut of the stems. "It's...interesting. Slow. I keep thinking I'm bored. But it's also...peaceful."

I nodded without looking up. "When you settle into this kind of flow, time passes differently."

He delicately selected another stem, rolling it between his fingers. "I can feel a channel connecting us," he said carefully. "The mating bond. I'm aware that my magic is running into you as we work...but a little of yours is running into me, too."

I almost dropped my secateurs.

"My magic?"

He nodded. "You might not be so aware of it." He paused. "Gaining my magic probably overwhelms the sense that you're losing a little of your own. But I'm used to sensing my magic in my body. It's interesting tasting yours muddling with it. Like it's taken on a different flavor."

I paused, looking inwardly, trying to sense what he was describing. At last, I shook my head. "I can't feel it."

Thorne shrugged, examining the stem more closely. "You might be able to, in the future. If we spend more time figuring out what you can draw on from me, exactly. Whether it's just that you can use me like an additional reserve of power—which it's become very clear you can do—or whether you might be able to use some of my powers. To shadow walk, or summon a wind, or meld metal with your touch."

My mouth dried. "Could I...do that now?"

"I don't know how we would try to make that work. Whether it's even possible at all. Your body is still human, after all. It has limitations. At the very least, I'd like to read more of the book you found in the Shadow Court. To see if I can find any more in there about the early enchanters being mated to fae."

Curiosity twisted around disappointment in my chest. I wanted to explore what I could do—what my bond with Thorne looked like—but it sounded like that would have to wait.

A rap suddenly sounded at the door, and my head snapped up as Laurel pushed it open and sauntered in.

She halted before us, hands on hips, brows knitted together.

I lowered the stem I had been stripping. “What?”

She spread her arms, gesturing to Thorne. “It’s not enough you have to cloister yourself away, working as obsessively as ever and avoiding the celebrations all week. You’ve now recruited some poor unsuspecting fae as an assistant.”

My lips pressed together. “This is *important*, Laurel. And he wanted to help.”

“Sure he did.”

“He did!”

I looked beseechingly at Thorne.

The hint of a smile tugged up his lips. “I didn’t realize you’d grown so fond of me,” he murmured, shooting Laurel a look.

“Well, you sent Green back to the Flower Court.” She hopped up onto the workbench beside me, swinging her legs. “I need *someone* to entertain me.” Picking up one of the now-bare stems, she raised an eyebrow. “It’s good to see all your hard work is paying off at least. You’ve made these bald stems look *lovely*.”

I glared at her as I reached out to snatch it back. “It’s not finished.”

She let out an exaggerated sigh, letting the stem slide from her hands. “Are you at least going to attend the final celebrations at Spring Equinox tomorrow?”

My gaze dropped to the bare stems in my hands. “The thing is, Laurel, you kind of have a point about these not looking like a crown yet...”

She let out a deliberately loud groan and swung around me to look closer at Thorne. “And you couldn’t have used any of your time in that Cursed Court helping her to lighten up?”

Thorne’s lips twitched. “In the time I’ve known her, Aster has made it very clear to me that she knows her own mind. Besides, in the Cursed Court, I was the one who could do with lightening up...”

Laurel threw her hands up in mock despair. “I give up! You’re as bad as each other.” Sliding off the workbench, she strode to the door, then shot a lingering look back at me. “I came here to ask about Spring Equinox because Dad asked me to. But in my own opinion, too, regardless of whether you’re a greenwitch or a faerie queen, Aster, you work too hard. Breaks are

important.”

My hand clenched around the secateurs. “I would *love* to take a break, Laurel. But as long as Faolan’s out there, humans everywhere are in danger. Ren told me we’re running out of time. Only I can stop Faolan...and to do that, I have to finish the Spring Crown.”

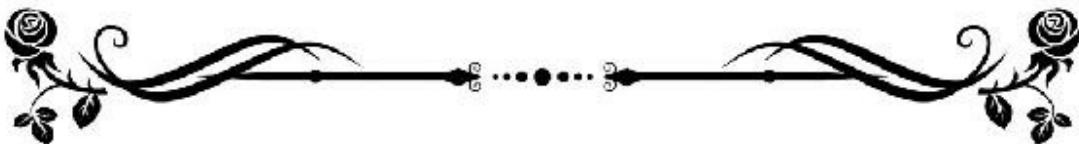
The truth of what I was saying settled into my chest like a dagger of ice.

I swallowed, hard. I had to hold on to the warmth and love I felt for Thorne as we worked alongside one another in order to pour the right emotions into my enchantment.

But no matter how much love I felt, the weight of what we were up against hovered over us like a shadow.

And I couldn’t stop the niggling feeling that I was already too late.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



I SQUINTED CLOSER at the crown, a dull headache rising around my temples and pressing between my eyes. The dwindling candlelight sent flickering shadows along my workbench. I dragged the candle closer, my fingertips cooling as I paused my enchanting to inspect my work so far, skimming over the flowers and foliage, checking they were braided into the crown securely.

This was by far the most powerful and complex enchantment I'd woven from scratch. Without Thorne's power, his steady presence beside me, I wasn't sure I'd even be standing from the amount of energy I'd expended over the last week or so.

Another few days of work and it would be ready to test.

What would happen next—using it to challenge Faolan—still felt too huge to comprehend. Ever since I'd left the Sky Court, Faolan had been chasing after me. First sending his messenger to the Forest Court, then ambushing us on the Sea Court island, then attacking us in the Shadow Court.

But when the new crown was completed...I would bring the fight to him.

I leaned back in my chair and yawned. The hard wood of the backrest dug into my lower back, tense and aching from so long hunched over the Spring Crown. Thorne was sitting up on the table next to my workspace, his head tilted back against the window, exposing the long, smooth column of his throat.

The distant sounds of laughter and music spilled through the cracked window, along with the lingering scent of woodsmoke that mingled with Thorne's familiar smoky scent and the herbs on the drying rack behind me.

He shifted slightly. "The festival sounds louder," he observed, his warm breath fogging the glass panes.

I yawned into the crook of my arm then leaned back, toying with the cool metal scissors. “The equinox is a festival of two halves,” I explained, “to celebrate the balance between the two halves of the year. During the day we welcome the light, and at night we say goodbye to the dark.”

We’d already missed all of the daytime celebrations. Children painting eggs, the whole town tucking into a feast of roasted lamb.

Thorne shifted upright, and my workbench creaked under his weight. His hazel eyes were sharp. “People seem to be having fun saying goodbye to the darkness.”

I set down the scissors, glancing at the unfinished crown before resting a hand on his knee. “Do you want to go? You’ve been stuck here helping me all day.”

“Being close to you is hardly a burden for me, petal.” He flashed a grin. “I’m perfectly comfortable. I want to stay here and help you however I can.”

I stood, stretching, my mind made up. “I need a break. I’ll concentrate better afterward.” I held out a hand to him. “Let’s go.”

A flicker of excitement crossed his face. “Are you sure?”

“I want to see Rosehill like this. Free of the Tithes.” Thorne let me pull him up to standing. “We can afford to take an hour off.”



We wandered through the streets, arm in arm. Laughter and high-tempo music rang out, getting louder as we headed for the outskirts of town. Others passed us, giggling couples flushed from a day of drinking returning to their homes, younger children zooming around, shrieking and laughing at being allowed to stay up past their bedtime.

“The festival isn’t in the town square?” Thorne asked, realizing we were headed out of town.

I let go of his arm, beginning to unbraid my hair. “The daytime activities were.” I’d gleaned as much from Laurel. “But they’re moving the evening celebrations to the surrounding fields. I think they’re expecting it to last all night.”

“Getting rid of a beast’s Tithe doesn’t happen every year.” He smirked.

I shot him a look. “Well, exactly.”

“You know, this time last year you were refusing my dinner invitation

and slamming the door in my face. Could you have imagined we'd be here together, at a Rosehill celebration?"

I definitely would not have believed it.

Even in the darkness, Thorne stood out. He was a head taller than everyone else, and despite being dressed in relatively plain, black garb, his graceful steps and powerful aura marked him out as *other*.

But despite that, no one seemed to mind that the Beast of the Folkwood was in their midst. I wondered if I had my father and his crew to thank for that.

Posts strung with tiny, flickering lanterns led the way out of town to the surrounding fields, where several blazing fires crackled. Winding smoke rose up, blotting out the stars above, and a band of fiddlers, hidden in the flickering shadows, played a jaunty tune.

I was glad I'd changed before we came out. All of the other women and girls were wearing white in honor of the Tithe girls who had been lost to the Folkwood. My actual Spring Equinox dress had never made it back from the Cursed Court, but I'd pulled on another pale-colored dress, a simple, square-necked, cream gown made of soft cotton.

As the full moon crested the top of the Folkwood, casting the treetops in a gentle, milky light, the women in their white gowns stood out like snowdrops as they danced with their partners.

We slipped through the crowds, wandering past trestle tables still groaning with the remnants of the feast, jugs of wine, and painted eggs. Thorne took up a plate of lamb with one hand and a glass of wine with the other, his wide eyes lit up with the flames as we watched couples laugh and move in one of Rosehill's set dances.

I made up a plate of food for myself, using my fingers to swirl pieces of cold lamb and spring greens in a fresh mint sauce.

The chatter and clinking glasses and jovial music washed over me. People were happy. No daughter had been sacrificed today.

And if I had anything to do with it, none would ever again.

"It's no fae revel," I said, watching Thorne from beneath my lashes.

"Well, I can certainly say that's for the best." He smirked as he took a long swig of wine. "You don't have the best track record with fae revels."

I scoffed. "Neither do you. Weren't you an antlered woodland beast at the last hundred or so you attended?"

With my heightened senses, I noticed how his scent mingled perfectly

with the heady smell of seasoned woodsmoke from the fires. There had always been something about it that had reminded me of bonfires at night. Of light in the shadows.

“Well, tonight I’m the perfect gentleman.” Thorne set down his plate and glass and gave me a courtly bow. “Would you like to dance, my queen?”

I raised a brow, gesturing at the townsfolk who were clapping and dancing and stamping in time with the music. “You know the steps? This is a human dance.”

“I’m a quick learner.”

“You can’t be *that* quick,” I protested but allowed him to lead me into the throng of dancers, all spinning in time with music.

Dancing was not one of my strengths, and while I knew the steps, I couldn’t match the grace and fluidity of Thorne’s movements. But my heart still soared, a giddiness sweeping over me as we spun through the crowd. I was happy.

Thorne wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me close for a moment, and I couldn’t help but smile to see a fae prince—*my* fae prince—dancing so beautifully in the firelight, perfectly in time with the human bodies whirling around us.

Even Ava couldn’t criticize his form, although I knew she’d have a stern word to say about my own far clumsier steps.

The song came to an end with a drawn-out note, and everyone clapped for the musicians and called for another, including Thorne.

I looked around. Speaking of Ava, where was she?

My sister usually had a crowd around her at any dance—of other admiring girls and a long line of suitors waiting to ask for a dance. I frowned. Thinking about it, I hadn’t seen any of my family since we’d arrived.

I patted Thorne’s arm, shouting over the sound of a new song beginning. “Let’s look for my sisters.”

He nodded and followed me. I caught sight of Marcia’s red curls, the town’s new greenwitch standing clapping at the edge of the dancefloor. The cider in her glass sloshed dangerously close to her white dress.

“Hi, Aster.” She beamed up at me, her cheeks rosy. “Hello, Thorne,” she added more shyly over my shoulder.

“Marcia, have you seen my sisters anywhere?”

She shook her head. “Not since the evening celebrations started.”

“Really?” I blinked. “Ava hasn’t danced all night?”

Marcia shook her head again, curls bouncing.

It was unheard of for my sister not to take to the dancefloor, where she could be admired by the most people from the most angles...

An icy feeling spread from my fingertips, the food I'd picked at from the table turning greasy in my belly.

"Thorne..." I said in a low tone.

I no longer needed to finish the thought for him to know how I was feeling.

He wrapped a reassuring arm around me. "They'll be fine. They're probably off having their own Wilden party somewhere."

While that sounded out of character for Ava, it didn't for the rest of my family, especially my father and his crew. And no one would have informed me because I'd told them a hundred times I wasn't coming.

Besides, Ava *had* been in my father's house with the rest of them when I'd first arrived back in Rosehill...

"You're probably right." I nodded, glancing around.

"I'll go back to the house and search the town. You check here." Thorne gave me a reassuring smile. "We're not in the Shadow Court anymore, Aster. This is Rosehill."

But I chewed on my lip, the worry still spreading through me. The enchantments around the town could keep out the fae of the Folkwood—pixies, sprites, or imps—but they would do little against an army of Court fae.

*Faolan has summoned the other Courts to him. He wouldn't come here now.* I tried to reassure myself, but to little effect.

Thorne brushed a kiss against my cheek, his lips a soft caress. "I'll find them. Don't worry."

Then he shadowed from my side, and a few of the townsfolk in the crowd near us yelped in surprise. I weaved in and out of the crowd, a pressure building in the back of my skull. The fiddles seemed to have picked up speed, the stamping of feet and clapping hands faster now. Everyone was dressed in white...and they all looked the same silhouetted against the fires.

"Laurel!" I shouted above the music. "Ava!"

I waited for Laurel to holler back, for Ava to chastise me for making a scene.

The wind changed direction, and the smoke rising from the bonfires rushed toward me, stinging my eyes and my throat. I coughed into the crook

of my arm.

Suddenly, shrill horns blared in the distance, sending birds screeching and cawing from their nightly roost high above the trees in the forest.

I pressed my hands over my ears. The horns rang through my blood and bones; they prickled like nettles over my skin.

They were like the screams of dying animals, like no human horns I'd ever heard.

A rush of fear swept up my body, tingling along the back of my neck.

*What the—?*

I lifted my hands away. The music had stopped playing.

A blanket of eerie quiet settled over the town, punctuated only by the crackling of wood from the fires and the soft stirring of the wind through the trees.

The woodsmoke cleared, and I whirled around. Everyone stood still, gazes pinned on the distant Folkwood, their shadows stretching out long behind them.

I peered at the person closest to me—Gilroy, the baker's husband. His eyes were glazed and unfocused, his face a sharp contrast of shadows and dancing firelight.

“What was that?” I asked him in a whisper, a hand on his arm. “Those horns. Did you—”

He took a sudden step forward, pulling out of my grasp.

Not just him—*everyone* moved, dropping glasses and plates to the grass below as they glided in silence away from the fires, away from the town.

Some lifted fiery torches from their stands, clutching them in two hands.

What was going on? This wasn't part of the festival, was it? Some weird performance or Tithe reenactment I hadn't been told about?

“Stop!” I cried out, my voice high with worry. “What are you doing?”

My next words froze on my lips.

The townsfolk all walked in the same direction.

Toward the dark edge of the Folkwood.

My fingers trembled. This had to be some kind of joke.

Someone hit into me from behind, their shoulder banging hard against my own. I stumbled to the side as they continued past me with a steady, ambling gait.

“Orrin?” I recognized my father's friend and the owner of the Gilded Hare, arms hanging at his sides, his face slack. “What's happening?”

I clutched at his shirt sleeve, trying to hold him still, but he wrenched out of my grasp, not breaking pace.

I blocked his path, holding him back with two hands outstretched. “Orrin,” I said more sternly.

A flicker of recognition seared through me as his listless, milky eyes met mine.

*No. It can’t be.*

“Everyone, stop!” I cried, but Orrin pushed past me, continuing his walk toward the forest edge.

This couldn’t be happening.

Away from the fires, a chill evening breeze curled around me.

The whole town was walking toward the Folkwood. Those at the front were already almost there, torches flickering like fireflies in the night.

“Stop this!” I cried again, running forward, pushing past the slower-moving townsfolk to try to reach the tree line.

My pulse hammered in my throat. My enchantments were still there from when I’d secured the town border against the fae—but they only stopped Little Folk getting in, not humans getting out.

Could I change that? Enchant them again to keep the people of Rosehill *in*? But I’d need... What would I need? I had nothing on me. Just this stupid dress with no pockets.

Panic made my mind draw a blank, and I cried out in horror as I saw the first line of torches disappear into the Folkwood.

The trees seemed to swell and breathe in with anticipation as the horrible, screeching horns rang out again.

“Stop, please!” My voice was a scream in the silence that followed.

I grabbed onto the arms and sleeves of the townsfolk passing me, digging my heels into the ground and trying to stop them from walking any farther.

Thorne no longer resided as Lord of the Folkwood, the curse broken, but the forest was still home to all those other murderous fae—the púca, the barghest, *thousands* of other creatures with a taste for human blood—and they were being delivered a feast.

Where was Thorne? I thought about calling for him, but if he’d already found my sisters...he’d be able to protect them. And while I had my rowan beads around my neck, preventing me from falling under the same ensorcellment that affected the rest of the townsfolk, my sisters were unlikely to be wearing any for the festival.

I looked about, helpless.

Who could have done this? The only fae in town had been Ren and Thorne, and they would never...

A thin sliver of palest moonlight filtered down from the night sky, far more concentrated than the light of the full moon hanging above the treetops.

A tiny, glowing faery appeared in the silver beam.

“Gentlefolk...” A familiar voice rang out, far louder than the whistle of the wind through the trees. “...and wildfolk,” she added in a lower voice.

I could make out the faery’s glowing outline now. The same tiny fae who’d arrived at the Forest Court in a beam of sunlight.

Faolan’s messenger. *Levina*.

My heart faltered, and I went hot and cold at once. This was all Faolan’s doing.

With my sharper eyesight, I could make out the tiny, fluttering fae, golden against the pale-silver light, wings a blur behind her.

“On behalf of King Faolan, the bearer of the Alder Crown, Scepter, and Orb, I hereby share his latest royal decree.” Levina cleared her throat. “The human Tithes are abolished.”

I inhaled sharply, fists clenched at my side, my nails cutting into my palms. I’d wanted to hear those words for so long, had wanted to make the announcement myself...but I knew what would come next.

Anxiety wormed in my belly.

“All humans are now considered fae property.” Levina gave a slight laugh. “They are yours to breed, hunt, or slaughter for your own needs and whims.”

The sounds that rose from the Folkwood at that announcement chilled me to my marrow—shrieks and howls and hisses of delight.

The tiny fae unrolled her scroll further. “In honor of our new Alder King, and to celebrate the reinstatement of fae supremacy over humans after the *misguided* rule of our previous monarch, King Faolan officially pardons all of the wildfolk and frees them from their imprisonment in the Folkwood.”

Cold tingles trickled down my spine, goosebumps prickling my skin as more howls and cackles joined the chorus. I stood, aghast, as more people from Rosehill disappeared into the woods, their flaming torches snuffed out as the dark trees gobbled them up.

I put a hand to my throat, shaking my head. I couldn’t breathe. How could I stop this?

These were *my people* walking to their deaths.

“Lastly, in celebration of his latest royal decree, King Faolan will be reinstating the Wild Hunt. The first of which begins, tonight, here in the Folkwood.”

*A Wild Hunt?*

I could take a guess at what would be hunted and who would do the hunting.

I took a lurching step away from the tree line, turning my back to the Folkwood, and was met by a sea of blank, firelit faces walking toward me.

I needed to get back to my workshop.

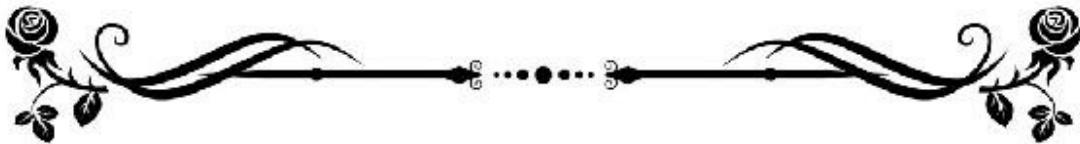
I needed to find Thorne, to *think*, but my thoughts were fuzzy with fear, the coldness at my core building and building.

“There are plenty of humans in the forest for your delight this equinox.” Levina’s echoing voice rang out again, like claws down my back. “But the *real* prize is any of the fair Wilden sisters.”

I froze.

The faery paused, her voice deepening with glee. “And *two* of them are already in the forest.”

## CHAPTER FORTY



A HARD KNOT tightened in my stomach. Waves of hot and cold washed over me as the same thought screamed in my head.

*Faolan has my sisters.*

I staggered back, darkness clouding my vision, a clangor sounding in my ears.

I couldn't seem to suck in enough air.

*He's taken them.*

My hands began to shake violently as I stared, wide-eyed, at the wall of trees ahead of me, an impenetrable darkness between their twisting boughs. Already, wild sounds were rising from the forest, eerie wails and high-pitched cackles.

And screams.

High above the treetops, a burst of flame streaked through the sky, and I stifled a cry, suddenly noticing the dark silhouettes wheeling across the moon. Even at this distance, with my keen eyesight, I recognized them from the description I'd been given.

*Wyverns.*

They let out shrill, ear-piercing roars as they swooped and dove, tracking prey below. Tracking my sisters.

My panic hadn't been misplaced when I couldn't find them in the celebrations. My gut feeling had been right. Thorne and I had been looking for them hopelessly, because they weren't there.

*Thorne.*

His name echoed inside my skull. Where was he? Had he heard Levina's message? Had he guessed what might have happened? Or had he already

been in the Folkwood when those terrible horns had signaled the start of the Wild Hunt?

I gasped in a ragged breath, still rooted to the spot in panic—and then shadows enveloped me.

Thorne stepped out of the air, wrapping his arms around me, holding me upright as the world folded in on itself.

For a moment, I remained frozen, then my hand gripped the soft material of his sleeve, clutching at it like my fingers had turned to claws. Like I was drowning.

“Aster.” His voice came urgently from beside me. His arms squeezed around me, hugging me close.

I looked up, and suddenly tears were blurring my vision.

“He’s got them. In the woods.” My voice sounded distant, high and fluttering like a trapped bird. “Faolan took them already. Laurel and Ava.”

“I know.” Thorne’s tone was anguished...but underpinned by a menacing growl that told me he was as furious as he was stricken.

“He took them...”

I trailed off as my thoughts snuffed out. I should be asking Thorne something. Telling him what plans I was hatching. Figuring out what to do. But the same words kept circling around my mind, deafeningly loud, drowning out everything else.

*Faolan has my sisters.*

Thorne’s hand moved slowly down my back, his presence a source of stability as everything churned and spun around me. Gently, he took me by the shoulders and turned me to face him.

“We have to go after them.” My voice was high with panic.

But how would I track them?

“No, Aster.” Thorne’s voice was low, composed. Everything I wasn’t. “That’s what Faolan wants. For you to run into the Folkwood, unarmed and unprepared. He’s using your sisters to lure you into the woods, where we’re outnumbered. If Ava and Laurel are in the Folkwood, I can find them.”

His words cut through my panic like shafts of light through a dark forest.

I blinked away my tears and lifted my hands to my damp cheeks, scrubbing at them hard. I took a deep, shaking breath. “You can find them?”

His grip fastened on my shoulders. “They’re your family. Your blood. Something in their scent is like you. Besides, no one will be hunting me. I’m fae, and I know the Folkwood. I’ll shadow in there, I will find them, and I

will bring them back to you.”

I drew in a shuddering breath, trying to process his words.

“You’ll find them,” I repeated again, but more firmly this time.

He drew me closer against his chest, and a strange sense of calm washed over me as he ran his hands tenderly down my arms. “I will bring them back to you.”

I pulled back slowly. “And—what about the others?” I shuddered again, knowing that if I turned around, I would see the last of the townsfolk walking into the forest, their limbs and faces slack. “If Faolan wants to kill me, why not attack me here in Rosehill? My enchantments won’t hold him and his armies back. Why—why would he do this?”

Thorne’s face turned hard, cold. “It’s a dramatic way to repeal the Tithes, and Faolan loves drama. He’s buying the loyalty of the wildfolk with human blood. But he’s also doing it because he knows it will hurt both of us. You, by taking what you love the most, your town and your sisters, and me...” His hands closed painfully on my arms before he forcibly relaxed his fingers. “This hunt... It’s to recall what happened with Eila. When Rowdon and the rest of us hunted her...”

I shuddered again, the horror of what Thorne and his friends had done more vivid than it had ever been before. They had formed a Wild Hunt of their own, for *fun*.

“Do you think Faolan will be in there?” My eyes darted to the forest edge.

“I don’t doubt it. He’ll let the other fae hunt you, but he’ll stay close by, to deal the killing blow himself.”

Distantly, my mind began stirring again, my thoughts slowly returning as I focused on controlling my breathing.

An image of the half-completed Spring Crown, which I’d left lying on my workbench, blossomed before my eyes. “I have to finish the Spring Crown. I have to use it to challenge Faolan *now*. To end this before more people get hurt.”

Thorne nodded. “Can you do it in time? You said you were still days away...”

I was. My stomach felt like it was dropping out from beneath me. “I don’t have a choice. It’s the only way I can force him to stop.”

Even though it was my own plan, some small part of me railed against the idea, wanting to race into the trees, drawing on the magic of the forest, of Thorne, to tear aside every branch, every leaf, until I found my sisters. Until

I'd made Faolan pay.

Worry creased Thorne's brow, as if he could sense my rage. "I know you're worried for your sisters and the townsfolk, but we can't let Faolan kill you. You're the only one who can stop him."

"I know," I said, urgency lacing my words. "I trust you to find them. Go now—I'll do what I can with the Spring Crown."

"I'll bring Laurel and Ava to your workshop. We'll meet you there."

My voice cracked. "*Hurry.*"

Thorne's fierce gaze softened. "I believe you can find a way, Aster." He leaned close, kissing my brow.

And with those words, he disappeared, leaving me all alone in an empty town.



I sat on the stool before my workbench, knees hugged to my chest, staring intently at the Spring Crown. One hand idled around my mouth as I gnawed at the edge of my thumbnail. I'd chewed it so intently I'd drawn blood, the metallic taste spreading over my tongue, like magic.

In the distance, sounds of the Hunt raged from the Folkwood—wicked laughter, wyverns roaring, the beat of fae drums sounding louder. They reverberated up through my body, whistling in under the door, filling my ears.

My insides clenched. I'd seen what savage delights the fae indulged in at just a party. How much worse would it be when the intent was not to drink and dance but to hunt? When the threat to humans was not a sip of faerie wine that made them forget themselves but to be chased down and slaughtered?

Fear like spikes of ice speared through my body.

These weren't just any humans under threat, but my town, my *family*.

When I'd been at the Cursed Court, all I'd thought about was keeping them safe. At some point along the way, my ambitions had grown to look after not just the humans in Rosehill, but humans everywhere around Faerie —to end the Tithes.

Was this the price I would pay for those ambitions? That my own people should be hunted down now, while I could do nothing to protect them?

Drawing in a slow breath through my teeth, I bunched my fists in my skirts and forced myself to breathe slower, to calm my racing thoughts. To take control of my emotions, like I'd once so easily been able to do.

Right now, I needed to focus on the half-finished crown sitting on the workbench before me, still more bare stems than flowers. I couldn't let Faolan get away with what he was doing to my people. I *wouldn't*.

But I didn't have time to complete the crown. To weave it with layer upon layer of magic so that it would mirror the Alder Crown, which was built on lifeforce upon lifeforce of past monarchs. The Spring Crown still needed a huge amount of power to be able to compel the fae. Power that would take more than a few hours to enchant it with.

I bit down harder on my thumbnail. In theory, I had everything I needed here. The base of the crown, the flowers Thorne and I had collected, my greenwitch tools.

I raised one hand to my temples, massaging my aching head with stiff fingers. It wasn't even just that there wasn't enough time to weave everything together. To make the Spring Crown, I needed to weave in the right emotion. *Love*. And right now, my body was riddled with terror for my people, with anger at Faolan, with a deep ache at the loss of my sisters.

I couldn't have felt further from the love I needed to finish the enchantment.

Besides, even if I could somehow force myself to weave love into the crown, there was another issue. Without Thorne here, I couldn't draw on his magic. And *that* meant the enchantment almost certainly wouldn't be powerful enough to compete against the Alder Crown. I was only one human.

I lurched up from the stool, pacing back and forth in front of the workbench.

*Think, Aster.*

I needed a source of power to finish the enchantment—something beyond my own body.

And I needed a way to complete the enchantment with *love*, even in the midst of all this terror.

I didn't tear my eyes from the half-finished enchantment as I strode up and down in a flurry of skirts. The only two flowers I'd strung through the magnolia stem base of the Spring Crown so far were marigolds and winter jasmine, the same flowers I'd woven into my circlet for the Tithe.

I bit back a bitter laugh. And now I was standing here, in my cream

petticoats, exactly a year later, as though I were about to go to the Tithe again.

I picked up the circlet of flowers, turning it around in my fingers. It was so like the one I'd made the first time around...

I froze, my fingers tightening around the crown.

*That's it.*

For a moment, I didn't move, a plan stitching together in my mind.

It was risky, yes... And I had promised Thorne I would wait here for him... But what good would that do? Without a working crown, we had no way of challenging Faolan, let alone the rest of the Wild Hunt.

And if I was right... If I could do what I thought I could...

My heartbeat picked up, fluttering in my chest.

I could do it. I was sure I could do it.

Without giving myself any longer to change my mind, I hastened around the workshop, slamming drawers open, rattling glass bottles, and stuffing concoctions into my enchanted satchel. My hands shook as I hunted for dried roses and speedwell, the two most crucial plants I needed to enact my plan.

Locating paper pouches of the fragrant petals, pink and blue, I tucked them carefully into the front pocket of my satchel, then placed the Spring Crown on top of everything else. I hesitated in the middle of the room, then grabbed an iron knife from the middle of the table and tucked it into the belt at my waist.

Again, it felt uncannily like when I had gone running into the Folkwood for the Tithe.

Casting one final look around my little workshop, I slung the satchel across my shoulder and swept outside.

It was time to return to the Cursed Court.



The forest loomed darkly ahead of me.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I hadn't felt this afraid of the Folkwood since before my Tithe. But now, the dark between the trees hid wicked monsters, the skeletal branches reaching for me, flooding me with fear once again.

I took a breath, resolve hardening in my core. I knew Faolan's plan was

to use my sisters to lure me into the Folkwood. And I didn't want to just play into his hands—but I had to cross the tree line for my new plan to work.

Plus, I would hardly be in the Folkwood for any time at all. I knew exactly where I was going—to the mushroom ring just a little way inside the forest. I'd used it before, to return from Rosehill to the Cursed Court, to break Thorne's curse.

No matter what, I had to try. This could be my only chance to defeat Faolan.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward, the leaves brushing softly over my skin as I crossed the tree line.

The moment I did, a low, crackling laughter like the pressure before a storm fizzed through the air around me.

I froze.

“Well, it took you longer than His Majesty thought,” said a wicked, disembodied voice, somehow both distant and a whisper in my ear.

A chill crept over my skin. I knew that voice. Had heard it earlier that night.

*Levina.*

Her cruel laughter swelled again. “Still, you came in the end. Although your sisters might have some questions for you, Aster Wilden, about why it took you so long to bother trying to save them... If you can get to them in time, that is.”

Snapped out of my horror, I moved forward wildly, raking my arms through the branches, trying to find the source of the messenger’s voice. All thoughts of the mushroom ring and my new plan were swept away in a fresh wave of panic.

“Where are they?” I shouted, but I was met with more of her cackling laughter.

The Folkwood tore and rasped over my skin, my feet catching on gnarled roots, the moonlight only just slipping through the canopy to indicate where there were twisted trunks, mossy rises, and grasping brambles.

“Better move faster, Aster Wilden!” the fae’s singsong voice came again. “You wouldn’t want to leave your sisters alone in here now, would you?”

Tears stinging my eyes, I pressed on, pushing my way through the undergrowth until I stumbled out into a clearing.

I halted, taking in the moonlit scene.

“At last,” Levina taunted.

My heart sank as I saw who else was with her.

Ava and Laurel were on their knees, Levina grasping each of them by the hair at the back of their heads, lightning crackling around them. Their lilac eyes were unclouded, bright with fear—or fury, I couldn’t tell. At least they hadn’t been ensorcelled like the rest of the town.

Levina smirked when she saw me. “I’m sure there’s a very good reason why you didn’t come right away. Why don’t you tell them now?”

She released my sisters with a hard shove. They fell forward, their white dresses making them look like two petals dropping from a flower.

“Then again,” the messenger said with a sigh. “Perhaps you’d be better off saving conversation for later.”

My throat closed up at her wicked smile.

“If it were me, I’d be using my time trying to get a head start...”

My mouth went dry, but Laurel was already back on her feet and facing Faolan’s messenger. She had no bow to defend herself with, but her words were like arrows. “A head start on *what*?” she spat.

The messenger just smiled and looked over my shoulder.

A chill seeped into my bones as I slowly turned.

A line of fae riders atop black stags edged forward from between the tree trunks, goblets of faerie wine held aloft in their fists, mischief dancing in their eyes. Above them, the canopy lit up with a dull gold light as sky fae flitted out to join them, clutching pearly-white bows and arrows.

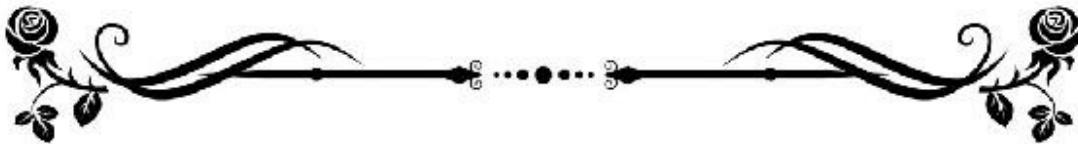
Levina raised her voice. “The final Wilden sister has entered the forest!” she shrieked, the wind carrying her words to the rest of the forest. “Let the games begin!”

I shielded my eyes as her lightning magic split the air.

When I dropped my hands, Levina was right beside me, her lips lifting into a sneer.

“If I were you,” she whispered, “I’d run.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



THE BLACK STAGS scuffed at the ground, hot breath puffing from their noses, their shadowy riders just visible in the glow from the Sky Court fae overhead who burned through the tips of the trees like a forest fire.

My pulse roared in my ears as I snapped my head back to my sisters, bolting toward them.

“Run!” I cried.

I grabbed both of them by the arms, tearing them away from Levina as we sprinted into the trees.

I caught glimpses of Laurel’s face, paler than the moonlight, and Ava’s dress rippling out behind her. It flashed white in the corner of my eye. Ava’s eyes were wide with fear, a terrified cry on her lips.

The forest was a blur of bark and leaves and branches. The wind roared around us, churning and bending the trees like a storm-tossed ocean.

But this was no natural wind that rattled and whistled and howled through the trees. The Sky Court must be in a frenzy.

I didn’t dare look back.

We ran with our arms thrown up, battling through the flailing trees, trying to stop thin branches from whipping us in the face as we pressed into the moonlit forest.

There was no path or trail to follow. Thorns clawed at my feet and skirts, while branches lashed near my face, their brittle fingers ripping strands of hair from my head.

Primal fear screamed through my body, pulsing in my blood, in my head, in my sprinting legs.

I was caught in a nightmare, hunted in the Folkwood, my sisters in

danger.

There was no time for anything but instinct.

Thundering hooves and inhuman shouts sounded at my back, followed by a human scream.

“Ava!” Laurel cried out. She had been racing ahead but twisted around, pointing behind me. Ava’s dress had tangled in brambles, forcing her to stop. I raced back to her, tugging at the satin to rip it free.

“This is *your* fault.” Ava’s breath came in short, sharp pants as she pulled at the dress. “This—”

A bellow roared through the woods behind us, a thunderous sound like trees being overturned, pounding hooves reverberating through the earth, shaking it beneath our feet.

A cold, ominous glow flickered to life through the trees behind us.

Ava screamed, and I shushed her, still trying to work her dress free. My fingers shook so badly the material kept slipping from between them as I tried to unpick the thorns. Then I remembered the knife in my belt and quickly unsheathed it, trying hard not to catch Ava’s skin as I sawed through the briars.

Twigs snapped as Laurel barreled back toward us. “Quiet, Ava. You’ll only bring them down on us quicker. We need to get downwind of them if we’re going to stand a chance.”

Ava snapped her mouth shut, her whole body shaking as she glanced fearfully over her shoulder to the sounds of fae stampeding through the trees, the glow of their bodies casting the trunks in long shadows.

A flicker of irritation cut through her fear. “Hurry up!”

I sliced frantically at the brambles. “I’m going as fast as I can.”

“They’re coming.” Laurel leaned forward to help with Ava’s dress. “Curse these white dresses. They’re like a beacon.”

“Forget this *downwind* nonsense—we can’t outrun them.” Ava’s voice shook, but somehow she still managed to sound petulant. “We should hide. We’re not too far from town. We can climb a tree or something. Wait for them to pass and then—”

“Give that here.” Laurel yanked the knife from my hand and slashed it through Ava’s satin skirt.

Ava yelped and stumbled backward, her skirt in tatters.

I caught her arm, keeping her upright.

“There’s no hiding from them,” I said. “Fae can see in the dark as well as

daylight. Not to mention their sense of hearing and smell.”

Laurel held the knife back out to me, offering me the hilt. “So what do we do?”

My eldest sister knew these woods as well as I did. She was a huntress; she slew fae on a weekly basis... And yet she was still asking *me* what to do.

I motioned for her to keep the knife. It would be most useful in her hands. My heart rattled in my chest as I considered her question. We couldn’t head back to Rosehill with the pack of fae hunters close behind us. And I still had my satchel, the Spring Crown lodged safely inside... My original plan could still work. I just needed to get us to the Cursed Court in one piece.

I tried to will some strength into my trembling legs.

“We keep moving.” I started into a quick walk, my sisters trailing after me. “We need to find a mushroom ring.”

“Are you *serious*?” Ava hissed, keeping close to my shoulder. “You expect us to search for *mushrooms* while we’re running for our lives?”

“I can enchant them to transport us.”

Undergrowth crashed behind us. I dared a glance over my shoulder, the distant flickering glow brightening as the chorus of unearthly shrieks and guttural growls grew louder.

“Where’s your beast?” Ava snapped. “Shouldn’t he be at your side, protecting you? Or has he joined the Hunt with the rest of *them*?”

I glowered at my sister, biting back the words I wanted to scream at her. She was just scared and lashing out.

I turned to Laurel instead. “Which direction is downwind?”

“This way.” Laurel pointed to the right.

“But they’re *everywhere*,” Ava protested.

I grabbed her arm and broke into a sprint again, the three of us veering sharply right and keeping close together as we raced through shadowy ferns as high as our waist.

The ground sloped downwards, my legs running faster than I could control, arms wheeling out to keep my balance.

A sweet, horrible taste burned the back of my throat, my lungs tight, struggling to get enough air. Sweat itched from my brow.

The slope leveled out, and the vegetation turned thicker, slowing us down, branches like long, spindly claws pawing at me, the wind whipping them into a frenzy.

A thin branch lashed across my face, just above my eye. I let out a curse

and blinked, hot blood trickling down the side of my face, the cut stinging.

*Ouch.*

Stupid tears sprang to my eyes, blurring my vision. I almost tripped but caught my arm against a tree trunk, steadyng myself.

“Don’t touch the trees,” Laurel called back over her shoulder. “They’ll use it to scent us.”

“It’s impossible not to touch the plants,” Ava panted, gesturing at her torn Tithe dress covered in stains.

I wiped at my cheek, a smear of ruby blood coming away on the back of my hand. With a dry swallow, I rubbed it against my skirts as I ran.

Touching a tree didn’t matter anymore—not now that I was bleeding.

The scent would already be carrying back to the fae, pupils dilating with bloodlust as they bolted toward us.

We broke out of the undergrowth into a clearing where ancient trees towered above us, framing the perfect circle of the moon. Wyverns filled the sky like crows, jets of flame bursting from their maws, serpentine tails lashing through the air.

“Silver bells,” Laurel breathed.

“What are they?” Ava’s horrified voice came from behind me.

I stared up at the monstrous creatures. “Wyverns...”

And they were hunting.

As we watched, one snapped its leathery wings close to its side, hurtling toward the forest like a black arrow.

But just as it grazed the treetops, something bright and glowing smashed into the creature’s flank, sending it somersaulting sideways with a hideous screech. The air filled with a chorus of roars.

A swarm of shining creatures crossed the sky, clashing with the rest of the wyverns.

“What are *they*?” Ava asked again.

I blinked, my enhanced eyesight seeing more in the moonlight than my sisters could. I suddenly recognized these new creatures.

Not creatures at all, but gleaming, metal chariots...

“They’re friends.” Relief washed through me. We weren’t completely alone. The Metal Court had come.

I wiped my sleeve across my stinging, bleeding cheek again. My hand trembled, cold sweat soaking my back while heat ran through the rest of my body.

“We need to keep moving,” I said weakly, even as my muscles groaned in protest.

“Aster’s right,” Laurel agreed swiftly. “We should—”

“Father!” Ava cried out.

I whipped my head around to see a tall, bearded man stepping out from behind a tree trunk.

Ava’s voice broke as she took a few stumbling steps toward him, before the effort seemed too much for her and she halted again. “Are you hurt?”

He shook his head, his gaze firmly fixed on Laurel. I studied his familiar bearded face, the shirt that fit snugly across his shoulders and stomach. He hadn’t even needed to unsheathe the dagger at his belt.

Relief crashed over me. Thank Folk he was okay. Now I had all of my family at my side. I wouldn’t let anything happen to them. And my father knew the Folkwood better than any of us.

“We need to find a mushroom ring, Dad,” I called over, beckoning. “Have you seen one?”

He blinked slowly, then ran briskly toward us, more light of foot than I could have anticipated.

“Wait!” Laurel’s voice cut through the night air, sharp as a blade. She moved nimbly across the clearing, heading straight for our father.

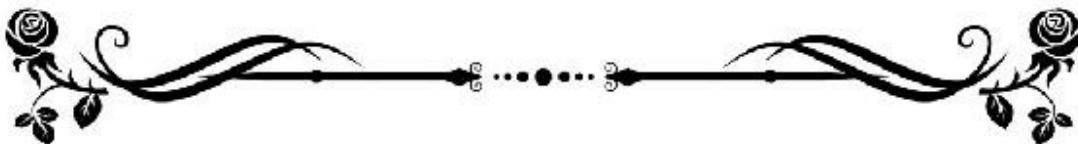
“What is she doing?” Ava hissed, eyes darting between Laurel and me.

“We need to get out of the clearing, back into the undergrowth. This way,” I called after my eldest sister.

But Laurel didn’t turn back, moving to our father’s side with an arm outstretched.

Then, quick as lightning, she drew back the iron knife and thrust it into his heart.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



I HURTLED toward them as Ava screamed Laurel's name behind me.

Was Laurel pixie-led? Had she been ensorcelled?

She pulled the blade from our father's chest with a grunt, and he staggered back soundlessly, grasping at the wound that flowered red across his shirt.

I dashed toward them, my mind racing with the enchantments I had in my satchel.

But this wasn't just a flesh wound—Laurel had stabbed him in the heart. How could I heal that?

Before I could reach him, she grasped my arm, pulling me back.

"Let go!" I struggled against her iron grip. "What's gotten into you? Ava, help me!"

Ava appeared a moment later and pulled on Laurel's arm, trying to get her off of me. "Have you gone *insane*?"

"It's not him," Laurel growled.

My voice came out high and panicked. "What?"

Our father thudded to his knees, his eyes never leaving Laurel.

It was only then I noticed how his edges had begun to blur. His eyes weren't lilac anymore, but a wolfish yellow. He grinned up at Laurel, baring sharp canines, my father's beard spreading across his face, down his neck, getting thicker and blacker.

Any relief I felt was washed away by fear.

All three of us took a quick step back.

"You..." The púca's hissing voice coming from our father's distorted mouth sent shivers over my skin. "I knew it would be you, little red."

Ava gasped as our father's face melted away. His outline blurred until it was replaced by a long-limbed, furred creature, vaguely humanoid, with long, black, vicious claws and a canine face.

It groaned, one hand on its chest wound as it struggled to look up at Laurel. "You...haven't been in the woods lately."

The púca had been haunting the edges of Rosehill since the very first day I'd become a greenwitch. It had killed Sage, taken Nairn, and tried to kill Laurel and me multiple times...and now it was dying.

It let out a wet, wheezing cough, dropping forward onto all fours.

We scuttled back again, still grasping one another.

"What is that? What's it saying?" Ava asked.

Laurel shook her head, her jaw clenched. "It's been hunting me all year."

The púca crawled toward us, slowly, its blood streaking the ground and lacing the air with the smell of iron.

"I wouldn't have let them claim you." Its voice was weak, almost lost against the sounds of the forest. Its yellow eyes never left Laurel. "You would have been mine."

"I'm no fae's." A frown darkened Laurel's brow as she turned away from the dying creature. "I belong to no one."

My sister's words were cold.

The púca's arms trembled, and it collapsed to the ground with a wet wheeze, unmoving.

"Is it dead?" Ava asked.

Laurel nodded, her brows pulled down. "But we have to keep moving."

All of a sudden, I felt exhausted. My hands trembled, heat tearing down the muscles in my back and legs.

But we weren't out of danger yet.

I forced my stiff limbs to move, headed in the direction we'd been going before we'd run into the púca.

Then I stopped.

Tiny, white-gray caps dotted the edge of the clearing like scattered pearls.

They were no bigger than my little fingernail, but there were so many, there must be...

My heart lifted, and I grabbed at Laurel's sleeve. "Look."

*A ring.*

But before we could move closer, dark figures burst from the undergrowth and into the clearing, bolting toward us. Laurel raised her blade,

while my hands went automatically to my satchel.

Then, as one, we stilled again.

*Not fae.*

My rattled nerves calmed slightly as people from Rosehill ran straight through the clearing, parting around us and the púca's body like a river.

Was it fear that gave them tunnel vision—or had they been ensorcelled to run for their lives?

I shuddered. I had no doubt these bloodthirsty fae wanted the thrill of the hunt. They wanted to scent the blood and fear on the wind. They wanted a *chase*.

I looked at each one of the moonlit faces, searching for recognition. Seeing the púca had reminded me that my father was in these woods, and while I knew he was strong and could handle himself, I still wished he was here with us.

The stampede quieted, disappearing into the trees on the other side of the clearing.

I looked back down at the tiny mushroom ring I'd spotted earlier, opening the flap of my satchel. "I think I've found—"

I broke off as more figures exploded from the trees in the same direction the people from Rosehill had come from, carrying the scent of blood and hot metal.

Ava's shrill screams filled the air as Laurel stepped in front of her, dagger flashing.

I caught a glimpse of bone-white hair, and for one blood-chilling moment I thought the Shadow Court brothers had found us.

"*There* they are." Eerie voices sang out from between the ancient tree trunks.

"Pretty sisters."

"Pretty *lost* sisters."

"And the pretender queen," a hard voice hissed.

An ice-cold wind stirred my ragged skirts, carrying flakes of snow on the breeze. All of the fine hairs on my arms and neck raised.

The Frost Court was here.



In the silver light and forest shadows, the snow-white fae stood out as starkly as we did. Their snarling faces were carved as if from marble, their lips blue, black eyes cold and glittering in the moonlight as they looked at one another with wicked, pointed smiles.

Their long, pale limbs were garbed in glittering armor that seemed to be sculpted from ice.

They were just as hard and cold and terrifying as Neve had been.

My gaze dropped back to the mushroom ring. We were so close...

More townsfolk bolted across the clearing, headed in another direction, but the Frost Court fae ignored them. They stepped slowly toward us, their predatory gazes unwavering.

*“The prize.”* The female fae closest to us stepped forward again, her long, white braid flipping back as she hurled a spear of ice at my sisters.

My heart faltered. “No!”

Laurel pushed Ava aside, throwing herself backward as the spear whistled through a narrow gap between the two of them.

“Leave my sisters alone,” I growled, hand delving into my open satchel.

My fingers met with glass.

But before I could hurl the bottle, the ground thundered behind us, giant wolves prowling forward into the clearing, sandwiching us between two lines of fae.

Laurel and Ava scrambled back to their feet, and all three of us pressed together, back to back, spinning around in a circle, not sure which enemies to face.

The frost fae who had thrown the spear cackled, holding out her hand as a brand-new spear of ice formed in her palm.

She gave us a look of faux sympathy. “There’s nowhere to run now, little mortals....”

The bottle still clutched in my raised arm, I spun as my sisters moved, feeling both Laurel’s and Ava’s shoulders digging into my own. As I faced the newcomers, two of the wolves parted, and a huge, towering fae stepped forward. He wore a wolf pelt slung across his shoulders and carried a deadly axe in his hands, just like...

“Morven!” I cried.

He strode into the clearing. His axe was already bloody, his eyes blazing.

“Run, Aster. We’ll cover you,” he bellowed.

At his command, the wolves sprang forward, arcing high over our heads

and crashing, snarling, into the line of frost fae.

Laurel lurched away—but I grabbed hold of her, pulling her back. “No—we need to stay here...”

I fell to my knees, dropping the bottle I’d been holding back into my bag and reaching instead for the dried speedwell and roses I needed. My fingers heated as I placed the flowers around the dainty ring of mushrooms, their tiny caps like flecks of snow in the moonlight.

“I need you both to get close to me,” I yelled over the howl of wolves and splinter of ice.

Ava dropped down beside me, flinging her arms over her head as shards of ice rained down over us.

I lowered my gaze, trying to ignore the freezing burn of it on my shoulders and the back of my neck.

Enchanting the mushroom ring wasn’t like one of my pre-made bottled enchantments. I needed to concentrate—to slip into the flow state that Craft demanded. I needed to block out the unnatural shrieks and howls of the fae that circled us, the glint of frost that sparkled and drifted around us.

I ran my tongue over my dry lips, my hands shaking as I arranged the flowers in careful patterns, my fingertips heating.

“Aster...” Laurel’s voice was low with warning as she huddled in beside us, the knife still held aloft, her muscles tense.

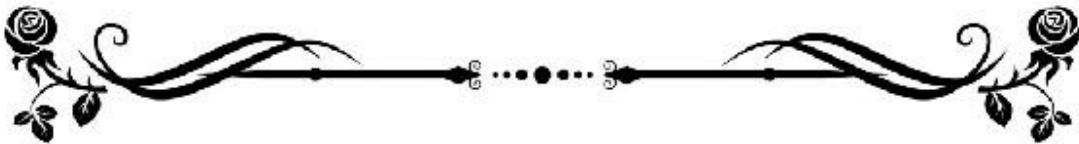
I tucked a final sprig of speedwell behind one of the mushrooms with trembling, burning fingers.

More ice chips shattered above us as Morven’s axe smashed through another spear whistling in our direction.

“Now!” I cried, grabbing my sisters’ arms.

And I dragged them inside the mushroom ring.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



THE THREE OF US collapsed in a heap, like plants torn from the earth and tossed aside, all on our knees inside the toadstool ring.

I thrust my shaking hands out against the damp earth, pressing myself up and casting a look around to check where we'd ended up. A low sigh shuddered from my lips, my shoulders sagging as I took in the ruins of the Cursed Court.

*We made it.*

Still, my body stiffened at the eerie quiet. After the wild chaos of the Hunt through the Folkwood, the remnants of the Cursed Court were utterly silent, not disturbed by any wildfolk of the forest or Court Fae trying to claim us as prizes. Even the frightening howls and jeers and shrieks that had laced the air had grown muffled and distant, the wind dropped to stillness. As if we were in the eye of the storm.

Beside me, Laurel scrambled to her feet, shifting into a defensive stance. "You did it," she said, although her brows knitted together as she took in the strange quiet, the ruins overtaken by forest.

More slowly, Ava picked herself upright, her face scrunched up. "I thought you said if we found mushrooms, you could get us out of here." A deep scowl crossed her face as she gestured around. "Where is this? Are we still in the Folkwood?"

"This is exactly where we needed to go," I said. "The Cursed Court."

"The Cursed Court?" Ava repeated sharply.

I nodded. "This is where I lived for the six months of the Tithe. Where all the Tithe girls lived."

A look of disgust crossed Ava's face as she took in the clearing. "This is

where that fae prince of yours lived?"

"It wasn't always like this," I retorted, unable to help myself. "There was a mansion here before, which an enchantress—Yvette—wove out of the forest."

I drew in a breath. I could still make out the shape of the rooms I'd lived in for the six months that I'd been here. I still knew all of it, knew precisely where we stood in relation to the house.

"So when you say this is exactly where we need to be, what you mean is this is exactly where *you* want to be." Ava planted her hands on her hips. "You could have used that mushroom ring to take us home, but instead you've taken us farther into the forest."

I lifted a hand, raking my fingers through my wild curls. I didn't have time to tell my sister everything. The respite from our chase through the Folkwood was welcome, but I didn't know how long it would last. The Folk of the forest might not be here right now...but the moment any of them picked up our scent, they would come for us.

"I assume you have a plan?" Laurel ignored Ava's complaints, stepping to my side and casting assessing glances around us for any sign of a fae who might have found us.

I nodded slowly. "This way." I gestured toward the remnants of the manor and began to pick my way through the undergrowth. "I need to get to one of the gardens."

*The rose garden.*

"So we're just supposed to follow you blindly?" Ava said flatly from behind us. "Even though you're putting us at risk for some hare-brained scheme you won't even share with us?"

Exhaustion and fear frayed my usual restraint around my middle sister. "Would you prefer to stay here alone?"

She pursed her lips and, without responding, trailed after us.

We hurried through the damp vegetation, the occasional ghostly sound from the Folkwood still trickling through the air. We stumbled through the fresh growth exploding to life—fiddlehead ferns looking just like their namesakes, spring flowers blooming even in the darkness.

I couldn't help the crack in my chest, the nostalgia swelling as my gaze traced the outline of where the Cursed Court had once stood.

It was funny. Having spent what felt like an impossibly long time trying to get away from this place while I'd been prisoner here, it now felt like I'd

come home. Even with a Wild Hunt chasing after me.

“And it reduced to this every year?” Laurel murmured from my right.

I blinked. Of course, Laurel had seen the Cursed Court while the mansion had still been standing, when she’d come to tell me about Ava and the other faesick girls.

I nodded. “It was part of the curse. At Spring Equinox, Thorne would return to his fae form, and a mansion would grow out of the forest. Then there’d be six months for a Tithe girl to fall in love with him.” I wrapped my arms around myself to keep off the chill. “At Autumn Equinox, if the Tithe girl failed to break the curse, Thorne would turn into a beast, and the mansion would return to the forest.”

Laurel nodded considerably, her gaze skimming the outline of the Court. “I can still just about see it,” she said. “Where the buildings must once have stood. But it looks like it’s been abandoned for centuries, not months...”

I shrugged. “It was enchanted.”

“And you’re as powerful as that now, are you?” Ava’s voice came suddenly from behind us.

I startled, surprised that she’d been paying attention to our conversation.

She lifted her hands, her lilac eyes fierce. “You could raise a mansion if you wanted to, could you? Curse a fae prince?”

I gave her an even look. “Yes,” I said. “But a really powerful enchantment takes time. Time I don’t have. That’s why I’ve brought us back here.”

“Is this the part where you reveal your plan?” Laurel asked.

I gestured around us. “This place... It’s still run through with Yvette’s magic—that’s the enchantress who cursed Thorne. And I’m hoping that some of the enchantments I cast while I was here will mean something of my magic lingers here too...” My voice dropped. “I spent most of my time working on a garden of roses.”

In spite of everything, Laurel let out a low chuckle. “Trust you to spend your time in a cursed mansion *gardening*.”

My lips lifted. “The irony struck me, too, at the time—that that was what Thorne wanted me to do.” I quickened my pace. “But it was growing the enchanted roses that was key to breaking the curse. When I grew them, I poured my love for Thorne into them.” My cheeks heated a little as I confessed it.

“Love?” Ava repeated.

I couldn't read her tone. But I was saved from replying as the rose garden came into view.

Or what was left of it.

"That's it." I pointed.

Only the arch into the garden was still standing, the rest little more than a ruin, the collapsed stone lying in a circle of rubble where the walls had once stood.

We stepped through the arch—and I stopped dead.

Ava let out a humorless laugh. "Some gardener you were." She sniffed. "Let's hope this isn't a reflection on the *love* you claim to feel for that fae beast of yours."

I looked around. When I'd last been here, this place had been filled with bright, perfumed flowers.

Now all that remained were briars knotted around chunks of stone and fallen gargoyles.

"It doesn't matter," I said, trying to inject firmness into my tone. "I can work with thorns."

"They'll still have enough of your magic in them?" Laurel didn't sound convinced.

I nodded. "It'll work for what I have in mind."

Hurrying forward, I retrieved my secateurs from my satchel and began snipping lengths of the thinner, more pliable stretches of briars. My fingers pinched the smooth parts of their stems almost fondly, like greeting an old friend. They felt hot beneath my hands, as though I could sense the enchantment already woven into them.

While I worked, Laurel skirted the remains of the wall, assessing it as a defensive structure. After a beat, she pulled the iron dagger I'd given her from her belt and plunged the blade into the ground, clearing the weeds as she scored a deep circle around the perimeter of the garden.

"Old habits," she said with a shrug when she saw me looking. "It seems quiet here now, but there's still a forest filled with fae hunting us."

I nodded slowly, although my attention remained on the briars beneath my fingers.

When I had a small pile of thorny stems at my feet, I dropped to the ground beside them and pulled the half-finished Spring Crown from my satchel, turning it carefully in my hands, making sure nothing had been damaged on our race through the forest.

I exhaled slowly. It still looked in perfect condition—as it should be, since I’d doused it in the chrysanthemum tincture. Deftly, I began weaving the briars into the circlet, into an intricate pattern to ensure they held securely.

Laurel was still pacing around.

“There’s salt in my bag,” I called.

With a nod, she dropped to my side and rummaged around in my satchel for the pouch of salt before heading for the ruined perimeter of the garden once more, sprinkling a thin line inside the circle she’d drawn with the knife.

“So what, we just sit here while you arrange flowers?”

I glanced up again. Ava stood close beside me, her arms crossed tightly across her chest, as though she were hugging herself.

“You can help Laurel with the salt if you want to make yourself useful,” I replied.

Ava didn’t move.

I drew in a slow breath and allowed my frustration with her to pour into my work as I continued to weave the crown. The emotion made my hands burn hotter. “I told you, there’s already magic in these briars—Yvette’s and mine. I need that magic to make my crown powerful enough.”

“And this is it?” Derision laced Ava’s clipped voice. “You, on your knees in the dirt, in a ruined garden, trying not to rip your fingers open on thorns? *That* will create a magic powerful enough to raise a manor from the forest?”

“I *hope* it can create magic powerful enough to topple a fae king,” I said lightly.

My movements slowed as I neared the end of my work. Slowly, I tucked the end of the last briar into the crown before snapping off a piece of thread and binding the thorns tightly. I removed the bottle of chrysanthemum tincture and sprinkled it across the briars.

“There,” I said. My hands hummed with heat, a wave of tiredness washing over me.

But I’d done it. I’d gotten here, back to the rose garden. I’d finished the crown just as I’d planned. And none of us had been captured.

Perhaps there was still hope.

I looked down at the crown of thorns. It was almost unrecognizable as the Spring Crown I’d begun in my workshop. But I knew from instinct that for it to work, it needed one final ingredient.

“Now for the less fun part,” I said in a half-joking tone. “To finish, it just

needs a drop of my blood—”

“Did someone say blood?” A cold, sneering voice resounded around the garden.

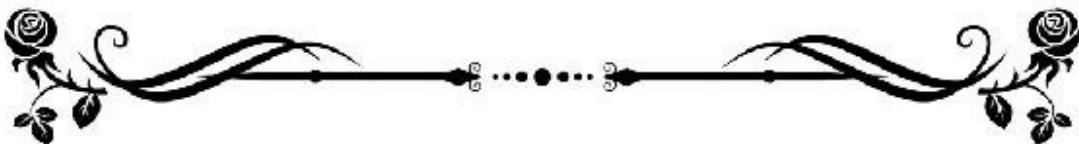
I snapped my head up, ice spreading through my veins

The arch filled with sinuous black smoke, tendrils creeping into the ruined garden and destroying Laurel’s ring of salt.

“There’ll be more than a drop of blood in this place before the night is out...” The voice came again.

And four pale-faced, black-clad fae shadowed right into our midst.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



I JERKED TO MY FEET, trying to move in front of my sisters. Bands of shadow slithered along my arms and around my wrists, binding them tightly together, tendrils creeping out like frayed rope and forcing the Spring Crown from my fingers.

I yanked against the darkness, trying desperately not to lose my grip.

But I watched helplessly as the crown fell to the path and rolled away on its side, spinning like a dropped coin before flattening and falling still.

My heart wrenched, a sickening feeling building in my stomach.

My plan depended on me finishing the crown.

Next to me, both of my sisters were similarly bound. The shadows had pried the iron knife from Laurel's grip, and it now lay at her feet. I could see her baring her teeth, tendons straining as she fought to swipe at the fae.

Ava's chest rose and fell rapidly, but her stare was steady, her hands bound before her.

“Shadow Court,” I murmured under my breath to my sisters.

It wouldn’t mean much to them, but it would explain why the shadows of the trees around us had darkened at the appearance of these horned fae, why they were now moving with sentience, rising up from the forest floor and creeping over the crumbled stonework like a dark, wicked mist.

“Don’t tell them anything,” I whispered.

Lonan stepped forward from the shadows, moving in front of his brothers. The Shadow Court heir looked as if he were made for the moonlight—they all did. His white hair was even paler in the silvery light, his brows as dark as his ridged, curling horns.

Both of my sisters recoiled at his inhuman beauty. They knew as well as I

did that, when it came to fae, the more beautiful the flower, the more deadly its poison.

And Lonan looked as deadly as they came.

“Lonan,” I gritted out.

“*Prize*,” he retorted with a wicked gleam in his deep-purple eyes.

He snapped his fingers, and the shortest brother stepped forward.

“What’re you waiting for, Arayesh?” Lonan’s smooth voice rang out through the clearing. “Declare our win.”

Arayesh said nothing but removed a horn from his belt and blew it.

The unearthly sound rang out like a hundred horns had been blown at once. Both Laurel and Ava winced as I did, the shadow bonds meaning we were unable to block our ears from the piercing noise.

The horn’s echo faded at last.

“Go fetch the Alder King.” Lonan gave a lazy flick of his fingers, and Arayesh nodded, then disappeared in a rush of smoke.

My knees trembled.

I was so close to finishing my plan. I resisted looking at the crown, in case they realized it meant something to me. They hadn’t seemed to notice it knocked from my hands when they’d arrived.

“Tracking you was quite the thrill.” Lonan paced before us. “Following the scent of your fear on the wind...” His eyes darkened. “Your *blood*.”

“Wild Hunts are so much more fun when the prey is this pretty,” Draven chimed in.

I glared at him, hackles rising as I recalled how he’d prevented me taking the scepter with me from the Shadow Court, then glanced back toward my sisters.

Laurel’s face was furious, her freckled nose wrinkled into a silent snarl. Ava stared blankly ahead, perhaps in shock. Both had obeyed my instruction to keep quiet.

I needed to buy us time, needed to get to the unfinished crown before Faolan appeared.

*Thorne!* I cried out in my mind. *I’m at the Cursed Court!*

I had no idea how the mating bond worked, but although I doubted Thorne could read my thoughts, I had to try.

I tried to think rationally. The mating bond was built on emotions and magic. I tried to let myself *feel*—the familiarity of being back at the Cursed Court, in the rose garden, the panic and rage at being caught by the shadow

fae so close to my plan coming together.

My fear for my sisters' lives.

"You can't kill me yet," I challenged, my voice steady. "Faolan needs to do that himself for the Alder Crown to work."

"You'll do well to remember there are worse things than death," Lonan replied, adjusting the silver circlet on his brow. "And remember, you're not the only one I can hurt."

Ava tensed beside me, her shoulder pressed against my own.

"Draven, Cethin," Lonan summoned his brothers without turning around. They stepped up to flank the shadow heir, their dark cloaks flapping in the wind that filtered through the trees and shook the bare briars snaking at our feet. I swallowed.

Cethin towered before me, his short, pale-silver hair slicked back from his scarred face, which was as emotionless as it had been when he'd taken over Vanna's and Morven's minds.

Lonan stood before Ava, and Draven before Laurel.

Purple eyes met purple eyes. Gazes locked.

It was as if we were all back at the Tithe again, lined up in our white dresses while predatory fae stalked before us, deciding our fate.

Except I wasn't powerless anymore.

"Well, isn't this convenient, brother," Draven drawled. His long, dark-pewter hair reminded me of Kage's as it rippled around his face. "Three prizes for three brothers." He snorted. "I'm sure Arayesh won't mind missing out while he's playing messenger."

Lonan gave a spider's smile, not looking away from us. Cethin remained stonily silent.

"Of course, first pick goes to you." Draven nodded deferentially to Lonan. "Although remember which one of them put you into an enchanted sleep."

A flicker of irritation crossed Lonan's face, and he cut a furious look at his younger brother.

I tensed. It seemed Lonan wasn't thrilled by the fact that a human had bested him last time we'd met. And not only would he want revenge, but he would want to claim the biggest prize for himself.

As Queen of Faerie, that would be me.

Lonan walked along the line, a long finger pressed into his full lips. "Which sister will it be?" His cloak drifted behind him. "All so fair..." His

voice lowered. “And so breakable.” His features twisted into a vicious smile, and he let out a chuckle that could curdle blood. The smile disappeared. “And all with the same death-wish glares.”

I ground my teeth, my jaw aching. I wanted to lurch for the dropped crown, but my hands were still bound with shadows.

Lonan stopped in front of me. “But there’s only one choice for my prize. The pretender queen. The witch. Thorne’s mate.” He leaned closer, whispering, “Faolan doesn’t need you whole—he just needs you alive.”

He reached for me.

“No!” Ava stepped in between us.

Lonan’s eyes flashed. “No?”

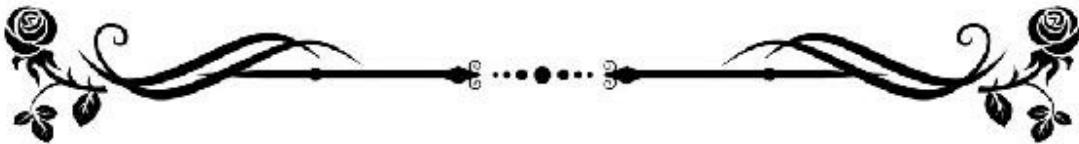
“Ava, don’t—” I started, protesting at the same time as Laurel.

“*Not her.*” Ava spoke over us both.

Her voice wavered, but I could see the steel in the set of her shoulders.

She stared up at Lonan. “I’m the better prize. Choose me.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



LONAN BLINKED, shock or some other emotion softening his cruel features for a split second.

Then, in one fluid movement, he stepped closer to Ava, stopping right in front of her. He didn't speak again, but his gaze traced the curves of her body visible beneath her torn dress, her shining mass of curls, the light smattering of freckles across her dark skin.

His lips curled up.

Panic ricocheted through me. The tall shadow fae loomed over my sister, standing too close, a dangerous smile still playing around his lips.

And there was something in the way Ava looked back, the way she was responding to him. Her feet were planted apart, hands clutched into fists at her side, chin tilted defiantly up... She met the gaze of the most powerful prince in the Shadow Court with a fierce look of her own, her will so powerful I could almost feel it humming in the air.

She didn't flinch back from him or look away, not even for a second, and it was as though the very air between them had become charged.

A tight fist squeezed in my chest.

It seemed impossible to me that Ava—Ava, who hated the fae—had spoken up. To save *me*. Her words echoed the ones I had cried at the Tithe exactly a year ago, when I had done the same to save her.

Was that why she was doing this? Because she felt like she owed me something?

I suddenly became aware of the hush that had fallen over the rest of the garden.

Laurel was staring at Ava, an expression between fear and approval

lighting her eyes. Meanwhile, Cethin remained perfectly still, his face a mask, although his eyes were also fixed on Ava and Lonan.

“Lonan,” Draven said in a tone of mock-humor, although his eyebrows knitted together. “You know that there’s a first prize on offer here...”

His gaze flicked back to me before returning to Lonan and Ava. Still neither of them looked away.

“I’m well aware,” Lonan purred, his breath sending Ava’s tight curls dancing.

The shadows around him writhed and roamed. Only, unlike in the Shadow Court library, these grasping claws weren’t attacking. His shadows curled around Ava like a caress.

“She is the prettiest one,” Draven admitted, leaning closer to his brother, his gaze raking over my sister. “Even dressed in rags.”

Cethin crossed his arms. “A fine choice, brother,” he said mildly, his voice a low monotone. It was the first time I’d heard the scarred brother speak.

Draven clapped his hands together. “And now I think I’ll make mine...”

My confusion returned to dread as he moved toward me on feet as soft as shadows, while his violet eyes were as hard as steel.

Recovering myself, I once again began yanking at the shadow bonds holding me at my wrists. But it was useless.

Draven halted before me, his appraising gaze tracing the lines of my body. “If Lonan wants the most beautiful sister, then I suppose I’ll settle for the most powerful. The so-called Queen of Faerie is quite the prize...”

He reached out a hand—and then something exploded into the middle of the garden.

My heart leaped, the mating bond tugging powerfully at me as a burst of thunder and fire and ice crackled and burned around us. A strong, metallic taste spread over my tongue.

I would know the taste of that magic anywhere.

Thorne ripped out of the shadows, standing directly between Draven and me. The heat of his body rippled over me. “Show your queen some *respect*,” he said in a cool voice.

To our left, Lonan let out a low laugh. “Still serving as human bodyguard, I see, Thorne,” he sneered. “And what a poor job you’ve been doing, leaving your *mate* and her sisters at the mercy of the wildfolk.” His lips twisted up. “Then again, maybe it was simply too tempting for you not to join in with the

Hunt yourself. I've heard those kinds of pleasures have been to your taste, at least in the past..."

Thorne didn't respond, but the prickle of his magic over my skin intensified.

I yelped as I felt tendrils of shadow slither up my arms, over my collarbones, wrapping around my throat until they almost choked me.

I tried to call Thorne's name, to get him to turn around, but the shadows tightened around my neck.

Thorne cricked his head from side to side. "Now, we both know that it's vital Faolan be the one to strike Aster down...which I suppose means you can't touch her right now."

The shadows tightened painfully around my throat. I shot a look toward Lonan from around Thorne's back.

Of course, he could hurt me plenty while still leaving the killing blow for Faolan. But I could withstand pain if I had to, if Thorne could defeat the shadow princes before Faolan got to us. If it gave me time to finish the crown....

Lonan's lip curled. "You'd really risk—"

But Thorne didn't give him a chance to finish.

A howling wind swept in from the Folkwood and into the open ruin of the rose garden, sending the bare briars clattering against one another as Thorne lunged for Draven.

With a shout of alarm, the prince disappeared into shadow before reappearing at the other side of the garden.

But Thorne had already moved again, toward Cethin this time. Lightning crackled around his fists as he threw them toward the shadow prince, the heat of fire spraying the side of my face as a swirl of flames joined his sky magic.

Cethin vanished instantly, shadowing over to beside Draven.

Thorne turned to Lonan. He stopped, flexing the weight of his magic.

"Of course, I expected nothing less from you," Lonan breathed. "Gifted with the magic of all the Courts, you go instinctively for the showiest magic, the brightest." His lips twisted. "How predictable. You think the light of the fire or the crack of lightning can drive away my shadows?"

Thorne just smiled. "You forget, Lonan, I have shadows of my own. And now that we're out of the Shadow Court, I can use them." He lifted his arms, dark ribbons curling around him, an inky mist pooling at his feet.

The horned prince let out a soft laugh. "I saw what you could do with the

shadows when you stole into my Court, Thorne. No doubt it looks impressive to other fae to see you walk through the air. But unfortunately for you, you still fail to see what wielding true shadows looks like..."

Fear shivered down my spine as darkness cloaked the entire garden, blotting out the light of the full moon. I still couldn't speak, the shadow bonds pressing painfully against my throat.

"You see, Thorne," Lonan's voice floated from the darkness, "shadows are about the in-between places—the insubstantial. They require more *nuance* than a beast of the Forest Court like you could possibly understand."

The gloom cleared slightly, moonlight filtering back into the clearing. Lonan stood a few steps away, a cool smile on his lips.

Thorne flicked a speck of dust from his shoulder and let out an exaggerated yawn. "I see Faolan finally found someone who talks just as much as he does."

And then he leaped for Lonan.

Unlike his brothers, Lonan didn't shadow away but instead lunged forward to meet Thorne, darkness moving with him in a rippling wave.

The two fae princes met in a clash of dark and light, sparks shattering away from where they collided.

I flinched back, but the shadow bonds caught on my wrists, my throat. They were lashed to the ground somehow, stopping me from moving. I struggled to turn my head, to look over to Laurel and Ava, to make sure that my sisters were unharmed from the impact, the shards of magic ricocheting from the fight.

But I could hardly see, my eyes unable to adjust to the alternating fierce light and total darkness that flared around the garden.

Snarls and howls and ripping sounds filled the air.

Then, suddenly, a deafening crack split the sky, my ears ringing and my legs trembling as the earth shuddered beneath my feet.

Everything went still.

I blinked rapidly, waiting for my sight to return. As the darkness faded, I could only see one figure left standing, right in the middle of the garden.

My chest caved in, pain spearing my gut as I took in the sheet of long white hair.

Where was Thorne?

Then my heart blossomed as I heard his voice coming from the other side of the garden.

“You forget, Lonan,” he said fiercely, “that although you’re beholden to Faolan not to kill his *prizes*, there’s nothing preventing me from disposing of these two...”

The darkness cleared, and I jerked my head back. On the far side of the clearing, Thorne stood with one leg propped up on a toppled gargoyle in a casual posture. Beside him, the slumped bodies of Draven and Cethin lay between fallen stones.

Thorne shot Lonan a pleasant smile. “I guess I understand the shadows well enough to dispose of two princes of the Shadow Court.”

Lonan let out a low hiss through his teeth.

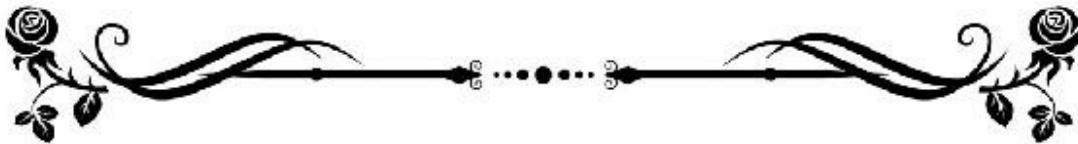
“Now,” Thorne said, “why don’t you break the bonds holding Aster and her sisters, and I’ll see how merciful I’m feeling toward Cethin and Draven here.” There was no compassion in his expression, only hard, fae power. “It would be a pity,” he added softly, “to lose two more brothers... Or perhaps it suits you to know there are fewer others competing for the shadow throne.”

Lonan jerked forward, fury lining his features at Thorne’s words before he caught himself and halted abruptly. He looked back toward the three of us, taking a half-step forward—and then stopped, a satisfied smile spreading slowly over his face.

Sun-warmed fingers closed around my arm.

“Looks like Arayesh found me just in time.” Faolan’s hard voice came from just behind my ear. “Now, if you don’t release my subjects and step aside, Thorne, I’ll kill this pretty mate of yours before you take your next breath.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



EVERYONE FROZE, staring at me and the bright glow emanating from my back.

Even from his position directly behind me, I could tell Faolan was a beacon in the dark garden, his golden glow casting black, solid shadows.

“That’s better.” His grip on me didn’t lessen.

The shadows that had been binding me dissolved beneath his sunlight. Or maybe Lonan had released his hold on them at the sight of Faolan.

I shifted so I could see his face, blinking at the brilliance after my eyes had adjusted to the shadowy wood.

Faolan hadn’t come dressed for a hunt. He’d come dressed as a king.

The sky prince wore a fur-trimmed cape atop a shimmering blue doublet. Not one golden hair sat out of place as his teeth flashed as white as the bone crown on his head. He wore the Alder Scepter strapped to his side, looped through a golden belt, the orb glowing through a sheer pouch at his other hip.

I shuddered where his magic touched my skin, prickling me like sunburn, making my eyes water.

The second he killed me, he’d inherit the true power of the crown. He’d be able to control Thorne.

My breaths came fast and shallow at this thought, nausea building in my stomach.

I needed to get to the Spring Crown and finish it. But how could I do that now that I was in Faolan’s grasp?

“Our game has finally come to an end, Aster.” He leaned closer so that we were almost cheek to cheek. He lowered his voice, the Alder Crown’s eerie whispers mingling with his words. “But it ends here. Back in the place

where it all began.”

Thorne growled in the distance.

I could smell his magic with every breath, his smoky rosewood scent as much mine as his now.

“Back to the place where you betrayed me, you mean.” I spoke through gritted teeth. My throat felt sore from where the shadows had been wrapped around it.

“Poetic, isn’t it?” There was a detached thoughtfulness to Faolan’s words.

He spun me to face him, one hand on the nape of my neck, the other looped around my back, dipping me away from him. From a distance, it could have been the passionate hold of a lover, but I knew better.

He held me like this to remind Thorne how easily he could snap my neck if my mate made one wrong move.

I fell still in his grip, my body recoiling at his proximity, our legs pressed together, his long fingers gripping the delicate skin at the back of my neck.

“A little *too* poetic, in fact,” he mused, his blue eyes narrowing as they trailed over my face, my body. “Why would you return to the Cursed Court, Aster? It’s the most obvious place to look for you.”

The hand around my back moved, sliding around my hips. I let out a protest, then realized he wasn’t groping me.

He was patting me down, searching for something.

“You’ve taken everything from me already,” I said. “You have the crown, the scepter, the orb.”

Faolan let out a musical laugh. “Everything? You forget, Aster. I know you. I was a friend to you once, back when you were just a frightened little greenwitch.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Take all this away—your stolen title, the Regalia, your mate—and I know what you will fall back to. I watched you every day in the garden, watched you slay a wyrm with nothing more than a slender branch in your hand.”

His grip tightened on the back of my neck, his fingertips walking along my collarbone, then down my arm.

“You expect me to believe that you, a greenwitch and an enchantress, discovered in the heart of the Folkwood, in a *garden*, do not have some kind of magic up your dirty...little...sleeves?” With his last words, he yanked back my sleeves, one after the other, revealing bare wrists.

I snatched them away from him. “I’m not hiding anything.”

*Not on me, at least.*

“Your word means nothing to me, Aster,” Faolan said solemnly. “No human word does.”

The Shadow Court fae laughed at that pronouncement, and I glanced back over to them. Lonan had grabbed hold of Ava and stood close behind like her shadow, while Arayesh gripped Laurel, who was now wrapped in even more shadow bindings, including one around her mouth. I wondered what she had said or who she had bitten to earn that.

Faolan twisted me around so suddenly the motion made me feel sick.

His hand wrapped around my throat as he pulled me back against him. I stared straight at Thorne. The cords at his throat were tense, and more shadows than I’d ever seen around him wreathed his shoulders.

At his feet, Cethin and Draven still lay motionless on the ground.

“What is she planning, Thorne? Why is she here?” Faolan demanded.

Relief throbbed in my chest. *As long as he thinks I’ve done something that might hurt him later, he won’t kill me outright.*

A pained expression crossed my mate’s face. “I don’t know why she came to the Cursed Court.”

*The truth.*

I’d changed my plan only after he’d left to help my sisters, before I could tell him what I was going to do.

Faolan hummed. “Take a guess.”

Thorne was silent, magic rippling from him in invisible waves. I could tell he was struggling to keep his power leashed, but he knew any outburst would hurt me as well as Faolan.

Faolan wrenched my head to the side. I bit down on my lip, heady fear and panic barrelling through me.

Thorne took two steps forward, fury and terror blazing in his hazel eyes, his pale face glowing in Faolan’s reflected light.

“What was that, Thorne?” Faolan leaned closer, as if listening. “You feel like guessing now? Because the alternative is I snap your mate’s neck right here in front of you.”

I squirmed under his tightening fingers.

“I can guess. I can guess!” Thorne said quickly.

“Then. Guess.” Faolan shook me like a ragdoll to punctuate his words.

Thorne dipped his head slightly. Then the words tumbled from him in a rush. “She’s making a new crown.”

“Thorne—”

Faolan clamped a hand over my mouth. “A new crown?”

Thorne nodded slowly. “A crown that’s more powerful than the one you wear.”

“Impossible,” came Lonan’s smooth, cold tones. “The Alder Crown is the most powerful fae item in existence.”

Faolan looked mildly irritated at the interruption. “And why, pray tell, does your mate believe her crown will be more powerful than the Alder Crown?”

Thorne looked between Faolan and the Shadow Court fae. “Because the Alder Crown is Craft. It’s an enchantment. It was made at the site of the First Court. Here.” His throat bobbed. “Aster’s crown is more powerful because it compels through love, not fear, and it gains its power from life, not death. And, unlike the Alder Crown, the Spring Crown doesn’t absorb power from the wearer during their reign.”

Faolan didn’t have to ask whether Thorne’s words were true.

“So the wearer wouldn’t die at the end of their reign?” the sky prince mused under his breath. He leaned closer to me. “How clever you are, Aster.”

My mouth dried. Not clever enough.

*It’s not finished.*

Thorne didn’t know that, though.

“Where is this new crown?” Faolan demanded, his voice agitated.

Thorne’s eyes narrowed, the hint of a smirk on his lips. “Last I saw, Rosehill.”

“Was she wearing it when you arrived?” Faolan asked Lonan.

“No.”

Faolan’s wings flitted to life with a whispering hum. I looked around. The trees surrounding the clearing were filled with glowing Sky Court fae, perched in the branches and dotting the surrounding forest like a starry sky.

We had an audience.

Faolan shifted his grip on me, and we shot up into the air, my stomach lurching. I resisted the instinct to cling tighter to him. The glow surrounding him grew brighter, the ruined garden and the whole clearing below lit as brilliantly as midday.

Everyone stared up at us. Faolan’s bright-blue eyes scanned the remains of the Cursed Court, the ruined buildings, the crumbled walls of the garden. “Where’s her irondamned bag she carries everywhere?” Faolan demanded. “Find it!”

There was a pause, then Arayesh—the fae who'd gone to fetch Faolan—shadowed below us, brown satchel in hand. He tipped the contents onto the ground with a clatter.

Jars and bottles and bundles of dried herbs spilled out. But no crown.

Faolan let go of me, and I dropped with a yelp, my stomach flying into my mouth.

He caught my wrist and I dangled in his clutches, agony tearing through my shoulder, my elbow, my wrist. "Where is it, Aster?"

I stared up at him, biting my lip hard.

"Stop this!" Ava stepped forward.

I gaped as my sister glared up at Faolan.

Lonan stared daggers into her back.

"Stop hurting her!" She glanced back to Laurel, and my eldest sister nodded in encouragement, still gagged with shadows.

"I'll give you the crown if you just...stop hurting her." Ava's eyes were wide.

My heart swelled. Ava was fighting for me again.

"You don't need to make a deal with this human," Lonan sneered. "You said it yourself—their promises mean nothing."

Ava looked over her shoulder, matching his glare with a haughty look. "I'm not offering a *promise*, I'm offering a bargain. I hear your kind love those." She turned back to Faolan. "I'll give you Aster's crown and tell you what you need to use it *if* you let my sisters and me go."

Faolan slowly lowered us down to the ground, his bright, sunlit glow dimming slightly.

"Ava," I cried out, "don't—"

"Deal."

A blast of icy wind shook the surrounding trees, howling through the clearing, whistling through the ruins. The gathered Sky Court and Little Folk whispered and chittered in the treetops. I noticed others watching from between the trees at the edge of the clearing. Pale Frost Court figures and armored riders on stags.

Ava's hair whipped across her face as she moved through the ruined rose garden, stepping over the crumbled blocks and searching pathways and the tangled beds of briars.

My feet touched the ground again, Faolan landing lightly behind me. I tried hard not to sag in relief.

“Not another step, Thorne,” Faolan warned, his gaze swinging to where my mate was edging closer, ice and fire and shadows dancing across his curled fists.

Faolan shifted me so I was on his other side, pinning my hands behind my back and holding both my wrists with one long-fingered hand. The metal of his rings dug in painfully.

“Here.” Ava stood from a crouch, the crown in her shadow-bound hands. She held it aloft. “Aster said it needed her blood to make it work.”

“Does it?” Faolan snapped his head to me.

I wouldn’t have answered him, but it didn’t matter.

“It’s true,” Arayesh chimed in. “We overheard her say something about blood as we arrived.”

“The same blood runs in our veins.” Ava watched Faolan warily. “Mine will do just as well.” She pricked her thumb against one of the thorns, then made a show of letting three drops fall onto the crown.

It was a gamble on Ava’s part, but I knew it would work. The same fae blood ran in both our veins.

Faolan watched her greedily.

Almost instantly, the fine hairs rose along the back of my neck. The magic of the new crown unfurled through the garden, radiating beyond its ruined walls and out into the clearing. Despite the bare briars, it carried the sweet floral aroma of roses and heavier metallic scents of pure magic and blood.

“Bring it to me,” Faolan said crisply.

*Greedy and entitled.* I glared at his gleaming clothes and gold-spun hair, every flawless, hateful inch of him.

Ava walked toward him, her chin held high. Even though she had no powers, nothing to fight with, she believed she stood a chance against Faolan.

She believed he would honor their bargain.

My breath caught. My sister had no idea what Faolan was capable of.

She held out the crown, and Faolan reached for it with his free hand.

Ava lifted it back, just out of reach. “Our deal?”

“Release the redhead,” Faolan called to the shadow fae before making a great show of releasing my wrists, whipping his hand away in a flourish.

He snatched the crown from Ava, turning it over carefully, avoiding the prickles smeared with blood. “Not much to look at, is it?”

I clenched my fists at my side at the smug look of triumph curling his

lips. He had both crowns, the Alder Regalia, and hundreds of Court Fae at his disposal.

He had everything.

Ava tugged me toward her. “Come on.”

I looked over my shoulder to see Faolan take the bone crown from his head and loop it around his wrist.

“Come *on*.” Ava pulled me determinedly toward Laurel, who was kneeling on the ground, scooping my greenwitch supplies back into my satchel, Thorne at her side.

“Let’s get out of here,” Laurel muttered.

Thorne reached a hand for me.

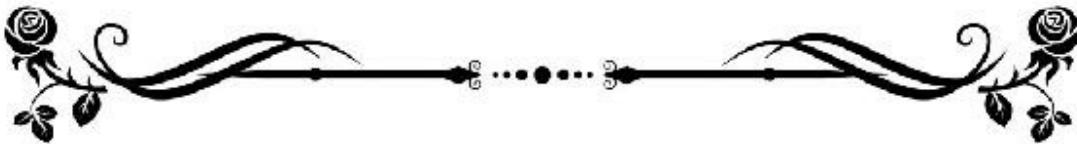
“Oh, and Aster?” Faolan called after us.

I turned back again.

A smile crossed his face, as bright and as beautiful as a summer’s day. His golden hair ruffled in a floral breeze.

Before I could say anything, *do* anything, he raised a glowing palm and fired a bolt of burning, brilliant sunlight straight through my heart.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



PAIN LANDED THROUGH ME, singing through my blood, a forest fire ripping apart my chest.

Dimly, I could hear my sisters screaming, a howl of anguish like a wounded animal coming from Thorne. But it all seemed very distant to me now, the sound muffled in my ears. Like the rest of them were far away in the forest, their voices traveling through a thick woodland mist.

The rustle of leaves, the chime of fae voices, all of it quieted to a rich silence.

A veil of dark swept over my vision, everything suddenly more muted, the colors of the forest dimmed. But this was a different darkness from the shadows that had been curling around us earlier.

This darkness was softer, deeper. It held me totally in its grasp.

The ghost of a sigh slipped between my lips.

A heady scent like smoke and rosewood surrounded me, cushioning me as I crumpled to the ground. Thorne was at my side. His hands fumbled for me, trembling as he reached out, finding my face.

His lips moved, but I heard nothing.

A heat, like the press of his magic, seemed to flow between the two of us, stronger than the feel of his hands against my skin.

I sighed heavily again, sensing that this was the mating bond, my connection to the fae beast I had fallen in love with.

And that perhaps it was my last connection to him.

Even the staggering pain through my chest seemed to be fading at last, a heavy numbness swallowing me whole. I was tired, so tired.

I blinked, slowly, the scene before me reduced to dim lights and faded

colors.

I could only just make out what was happening. Faolan turned away, already disinterested in what he'd done to me. The blurry figures of my sisters huddled together for comfort. The dark pillars of the Shadow Court fae gathered around them.

Faolan held the Spring Crown delicately in front of him, the thorns between the yellow flowers blurring as my vision faded, although the spring flowers still shone bright.

The crown I had poured my love into, which I had woven out of both my enchantments and Thorne's magic. At least at the start.

I had Crafted a crown to win a kingdom. The last hope of saving both the people of Rosehill and humans everywhere.

With a flourish, Faolan held it aloft, then planted it down upon his head. And I smiled.

Faolan turned back to the others in a whirl of sky-blue robes—and froze.

My lips lifted higher as my eyes fluttered closed. Faolan uttered a howl of rage, then dim shouts and cries lifted from the others in the garden and the spectators in the tree line beyond.

I breathed in, slowly...and opened my eyes again.

This would be the last thing I saw.

Faolan's head had snapped back, chest thrust out, feet planted wide apart. Sparks of magic caught in the air, a spring breeze whipping around the clearing. The forest groaned as my enchantment took hold, the briars in the rose garden all shivering.

I winced as pain blossomed in my chest, a sharp, fiery wave of it, before it subsided again. A deep ache cracked back into my heart, into my body. My lips parted in a silent scream at the scurry of hot prickles over my chest, like I was covered in burning insects.

But I welcomed it.

It was the feeling of my chest knitting together—of life flooding back into me.

But how?

The fog in my mind cleared a little, my senses sharpening, and I realized just how my body was healing itself.

*The mating bond.*

I still didn't know how to draw on Thorne's power, but it didn't seem to matter as the fae ability to heal themselves flowed freely between the two of

us.

My mate's hand clenched against my skin, still trembling, as his magic flooded down the mating bond. Saving me.

But he didn't realize, because like everyone else, Thorne couldn't tear his eyes from Faolan.

In between fits of unutterable pain, I looked, too. The scene was slowly growing sharper before me, the colors turning brighter again. I could make out Faolan's long fingers clenched around the crown of thorns, trying—to no avail—to wrench it from his head.

Then he could hold on no longer, his fingers growing too large, too clumsy to wrap around something as delicate as the Spring Crown. Thick, woody bark crept over his pale, perfect hands, up his arms.

His golden glow dimmed, savage greenery shutting out his light, smothering it with moss and bark and briar.

The Alder Crown fell from where it had been looped over his wrist, the bone clattering against the hard flagstone path.

"Aster..." Thorne whispered without looking away from Faolan. "What did you do?"

Spears of light struck out from between cracks in the wood that covered Faolan's skin, blindingly bright, as the sky prince tried to fight off the enchantment taking hold of him.

I squinted—and when I looked again, Faolan had changed.

The once-golden fae prince had grown dull, his sunlight completely contained by the forest. His body was papered over with a skin of gnarled bark, his hands contorted into rough claws like roots. Branches stuck out at harsh angles from his shoulders, his beautiful robes in tatters around his warped body, his golden hair streaked with sap and tangled with vines.

Only his sky-blue eyes revealed the fae prince he had once been.

He stood, swaying for a moment, then collapsed to his knees, holding his clawed hands out in front of him, frozen in horror.

Silence rang out through the forest.

Pain still shuddered through my chest, but it eased with each passing moment, Thorne's healing magic still pulsing through me, and I pressed myself up on shaking arms.

The motion drew Thorne's gaze back to me, his eyes wide with shock.

He helped me up, and I let him, then let go of his hand immediately, steady on my legs once more. "Aster—"

I stalked over to where Faolan cringed on the ground. Sweeping past him, I moved to where the Alder Crown lay on the path, the orb and the scepter beside it where they too had fallen from Faolan's clutches into a tangled patch of briars. The whispers of past kings and queens were a light susurration in the night air.

Lifting the bone crown, I placed it on my head.

I exhaled, and the whispers sighed with me, then fell into a contented silence.

For a moment, I remained very still, adjusting to the pulse of magic settling into my blood, into my bones. The spark that would allow me to compel the fae...and the sweet, earthy scent of death.

Bending down again, I pocketed the orb, then my fingers curled around the scepter. The instant the gold seared against my palm, the fae healing magic coursing through my stiff body intensified. The ache in my chest vanished, raw power shuddering through me. Every cut and scratch and bruise on my body disappeared.

I stood up, straighter, and glanced above me.

The other fae who had gathered to watch Faolan claim his prize shied back, cringing away from the magic radiating from me, their bodies spindly in front of the bright light of the full moon.

They could sense the power of the crown, stronger even than I could sense it in myself.

The crown had never responded to Faolan like this.

Like it was responding to the true queen now.

“The Hunt ends. *Now*,” I declared, and the forest winds carried my words to all the corners of the Folkwood. A word that was now law. I knew that the fae would be compelled to listen, to obey. “These humans are under my protection, and you will not harm any of them.”

I extended out beyond myself, into the earth, the birds and the insects and the Little Folk and all the plant life that spilled out into the Kingdom of Faerie. My body knitted together with the land, with the magic that stemmed from these woods. From my home.

I dropped my gaze to where the Shadow Court princes still stood around my sisters like a closed fist. The two Thorne had knocked unconscious were on their feet again, watching me warily.

I took a step toward them—and all four of them vanished, leaving only a thin curl of smoke in their wake.

“What did you do?” Faolan’s rasping voice echoed Thorne’s earlier question. “What did you *do*?”

A faint smile traced the edges of my lips again. “The Spring Crown was supposed to be the counterpart to the Alder Crown. To reflect a rule Crafted out of love, not fear. Out of new life, not death. One that could compel any fae and defeat the bone crown in a direct challenge. At least, that’s what it was going to be.” I gazed around the clearing at the fae gathered there, watching, frozen in place. “But when you brought the Wild Hunt to Rosehill, I knew I would never have time to finish the enchantment. So I stopped trying to enchant it. And I cursed it instead.”

Just like I had cursed the crown I had made for the Tithe a year ago when I’d pricked my finger on the thorns, drawing blood. Except this time, it had been intentional.

Faolan’s eyes widened in horror. “You cursed me—you lied to me. To your sisters.” His voice was distorted, like the rough grating of bark on bark. “Thorne *lied* to me. It’s impossible.”

But I hadn’t told anyone my true plan. Thorne had been able to lie because he believed what he was saying to be true.

And I had concealed the full truth from my sisters when I’d told them why I’d come here.

It wasn’t to use the *love* I’d poured into the roses but to draw on the curse that already existed in them. The powerful curse Yvette had imbued them with. I had altered the curse with my own enchantments, combining it with my own anger and desire to punish a fae who had no respect for human life.

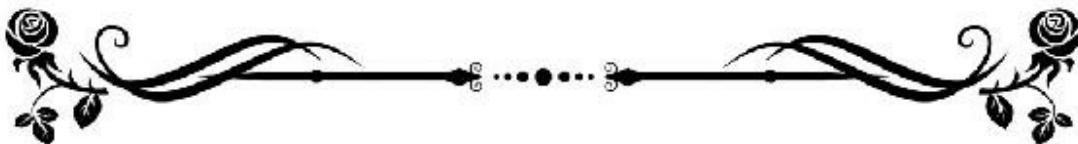
“I had to make sure you put on the crown.” I lifted my chin. “And you might be the master of weighing your words, Faolan...but that’s *nothing* compared to a human who can lie.”

He let out a low growl like the rumble of earth. “What will you do with me? You can’t—you can’t just leave me here like this—”

I held up a hand. “There’s an antidote woven into the curse, too. The spring flowers that I arranged together with Thorne. That I poured my love into.” I took a step closer to Faolan, still cowering before us, quivering with despair and rage at the monstrous creature he had become. “*Love* is the key to breaking the curse, Faolan. Just like it was for Thorne.”

My expression darkened. “But until you can find true love in your heart for a human... You are the new Beast of the Folkwood. And you will remain here, in this form, until your curse is broken.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



DAWN BROKE over the tops of the trees, a pale-blue light softening the skies above the Folkwood.

It looked like it would be a clear, beautiful day.

The trees rustled softly, birdsong filling the air. The forest greeted the sunrise as if nothing had happened at all.

But Rosehill was another matter. The smoking bonfires from the festival had been relit, woodsmoke shrouding the town. Shivering figures wrapped in blankets clustered around the dancing flames, desperate for the warmth and the light.

All night, more and more of the townsfolk had made it home, unscathed by any of the fae in the forest thanks to my words. Thanks to my new *law*. I raised my fingertips to the bone crown on my head.

I had spent much of the night helping Marcia to heal those who had returned, using the orb to locate others who were still lost in the woods so that Thorne and the other Court Fae who had stayed to help could fetch them. But there were still plenty who hadn't made it back yet...and who would never make it back.

I stood in a ditch at the edge of the Folkwood, my fingers fumbling over the posies of daisies, St. John's Wort, and red verbena hanging from the young rowan trees. I tore apart the flowers as I worked, breaking the enchantments I'd placed upon them half a year ago.

The town didn't need these enchantments any longer.

Farther along the tree line, fae returned with townsfolk in droves. Metal Court chariots skimmed over the tops of the trees, while other fae emerged from the woods on foot, carrying unconscious people in their arms. Just a

little way away, several pale-faced children rode into the fields on the back of large wolves—the Mountain Court fae in their animal forms.

I felt rather than saw the blur of shadows behind me. I tore my gaze away from the returning humans, already knowing who it was.

Thorne watched me quietly from the top of the ditch. Since I'd cursed Faolan, we'd barely had a moment to breathe, let alone talk, launching into action to get the townsfolk back to Rosehill before hunger and cold could finish the work of the Hunt.

“Did you find her?” I called up to him.

I'd seen a young girl in the orb, hiding in a hollow tree, and Thorne had shadowed to find her.

“She's back with her mother.”

I nodded, relieved.

Thorne watched me unpick the enchantments. “You should be resting, Aster. After everything that happened.”

“I told you, I'm fine.”

And I was. Thorne's magic had healed the mortal wound in my chest, and the moment I'd picked up the scepter, the magic had accelerated through me, filling me with energy after it had healed every minor injury.

“You're not a greenwitch anymore,” he pressed, watching my fingers scrabble over the enchantments. “You're the Queen of Faerie.”

“I'm both.”

Thorne jumped over the edge of the ditch, landing as lightly as a cat. “Aster, how can you be fine? You almost *died*.”

His voice was hard, but it cracked on the last word.

I took a deep breath, emotion tightening my throat. We had yet to discuss what had really happened in the Folkwood last night.

I owed Thorne an explanation.

“I know,” I said, toying with the posy in my hands.

“I thought I'd lost you.” His throat bobbed. “I could feel you fading from me, and it was like I was dying too.” He paused, his hazel eyes shining. “And then suddenly you healed yourself...”

He thought I'd healed myself?

“Thorne...” I stepped closer to him. “You healed me. Through the mating bond.”

Thorne looked incredulous.

“When everything was slipping away, you were the last thing I could feel.

Your love. Our bond. In the same way that I could draw on your strength to use in my enchantments, your fae healing magic saved me.” I smiled. “Thank you.”

Thorne’s cheeks flushed. “Aster, you don’t need to *thank* me. Our souls are connected now. If you’d died, I don’t know what I’d have done... It would have broken me.” He stepped to my side, sliding a warm arm around me and pulling me to him, his other hand tangling in my hair.

I rested my cheek against his shirt, pressing against his hot, solid chest, feeling the fast, steady thumps of his heart.

“But I didn’t die,” I whispered. “I’m here. I’m alive.”

He held me closer, folding me into him as if it might be the last time he ever held me. “You are the best thing to ever happen to me, Aster. I refuse to lose you.”

“You won’t,” I promised.

He pressed his lips to the crown of my head, murmuring, “You were supposed to stay in Rosehill until I returned. We were supposed to face Faolan together.”

I pulled back slightly to look up at Thorne’s face. His dark brows were knitted together, his high cheekbones glowing in the pink sunrise.

“It was always going to end with me facing Faolan alone,” I said. “One way or another.”

Thorne looked down at me. “But I was supposed to be with you—to have your back.”

“You *were* with me. And you did have my back. You saved my life.” I exhaled through my nose. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you what I was planning. It wasn’t my intention—there wasn’t the time. But in the end, *you* were the reason Faolan put on the cursed crown. You could only lie to him because you still believed it was the truth.”

Thorne glanced over my shoulder to the other side of the ditch and the dark tree line of the Folkwood beyond. “You didn’t kill him.” There was a question in his eyes when he dragged them back to me. “After everything he did to you—to your friends, to your family...”

“I know.” I pressed my lips together, sucking in a breath as I returned to untangling the enchantments.

How could I explain that? My sudden change of heart?

Thorne stared out into the ancient trees of the Folkwood, his gaze intense. Was he angry? No shadows curled from him.

“Are you upset that I cursed him?” I asked cautiously. “Like Yvette cursed you?”

I had adapted part of her lingering curse from the roses, the very same curse that had bound Thorne for a hundred years.

Thorne turned to me. “Hollow hills, of course not. I just—he didn’t show you the same mercy. He tried to *kill* you. Cursing him but letting him live... He got off lightly.”

I nodded slowly. I knew Thorne would have killed Faolan without a second’s hesitation.

“Faolan attacked my sisters to hurt me.” I reached down into my satchel for a pair of secateurs. “He knew how important protecting my family and Rosehill was to me. He wanted to take away what I loved the most before he killed me and took the crown.” My jaw firmed. “I wanted to repay the favor.”

“You took away what he loved the most,” Thorne murmured.

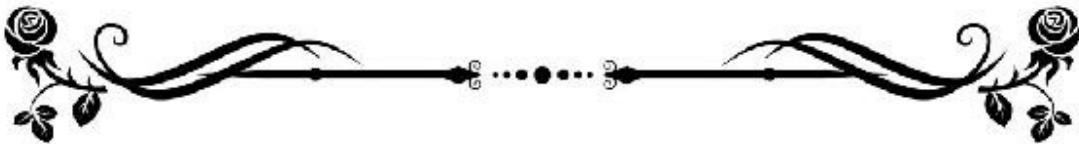
“I took away his status and his beauty and his shining Court.” A dark smile tugged at my lips. “Becoming a hideous forest beast, trapped in the Folkwood with no magic, no audience... He’ll have plenty of time to think about everything he’s done. He may well never change his ways. He might die as a beast with a black and twisted heart. But if he can change, I’ve left him a way out.”

Thorne tucked an escaped curl behind my ear. “What if he comes after you?”

“The curse is the same as yours. He can’t step foot outside of the Folkwood. He can only break the curse and leave if he *truly* changes. If we ever see Faolan again, he’ll be a different fae.” I shrugged. “His fate is in his own hands now.”

Thorne looked at me, his concerned expression melting into pride. “Faolan should have known better than to get on the wrong side of an enchantress.” He stepped closer to me and cupped my face, planting a gentle kiss on my lips. “You are strong, Aster, yet merciful.” The bond between us warmed, filled with love and respect. “I think you will be the best Alder Queen this Kingdom has ever seen.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



A GAGGLE of sprites swirled around me, twisting my shining curls into elaborate knots, their sharp fingers pinning them loosely at the back of my neck. I winced each time I felt the scrape of their clawed fingers against my scalp. But I didn't protest. As they worked, the woman in the ornate, gilded mirror before me was being transformed from a simple human into a queen.

A Queen of Faerie.

"Mistress has never looked more majestic." Mosswhistle's voice, trembling with emotion, floated up from where it arranged the layers upon layers of my skirts.

I swept back so I could see the brownie, my dress swishing over the polished wooden floor of the Forest Court. Mosswhistle stared up at me, its black eyes wet with tears.

"Never has she looked so regal." It reached for the skirts I'd displaced as I'd stepped back, rearranging them as carefully as if they were made of spun gold. "Delicate like Court Fae. Mighty, like human enchantress," it continued in a reverential tone. "Never has she looked so magnificent, so powerful, so forestry as she looks today."

*Foresty?*

My lips quirked, and I returned my gaze to the mirror. I guessed I *did* look like I belonged in the Forest Court now...

I was dressed like a rose, my voluminous skirts Crafted out of huge, scarlet petals, the bodice made of more of the same, sewn together with near-invisible stitches and embellished with a sweeping embroidery that made it look like the petals were being swept away on an idle wind.

"Was that a compliment?" A smug voice came from beside the mirror.

Ferne pressed away from where he'd been slouching against a tree-trunk pillar and arched an eyebrow. He prowled closer, sweeping Mosswhistle out of the way with a foot and taking over rearranging the delicate petals that made up my dress.

He smirked. "It seems I hadn't previously credited the little hobgoblin with enough taste."

"Hobgoblin?" Mosswhistle let out an indignant squawk and battered Ferne back out of the way. "Reckless prince as blind as he is clumsy," the brownie grumbled, glaring up at the forest fae. "Crumples petals beneath heavy hands."

Thorne's brother gave a wide smile that displayed his sharp, white canines. "What I heard is that you *like* the dress I commissioned for Aster."

The brownie's lips pursed, its shrewd gaze narrowing at Ferne. "Forest prince talks often," it muttered, returning to fluffing my skirts. "Does very little."

Ferne let out a musical laugh. "I'm not sure what else my future sister-in-law could ask me to do. She requested something appropriate to wear to her coronation. And I advised her of the finest tailor in all of Faerie."

I winced at those words.

The finest tailor in all of Faerie had indeed designed my dress, but he also happened to be an enchanter whom I owed a considerable favor...

"Do I hear faint words of praise about my work?" A silky voice floated demurely from the doorway.

As if summoned by the words of flattery, Yoren slipped inside the room in robes of floating organza that glimmered like rainbows. A shining silver pin gleamed at his breast, the symbol of the enchanters that had led me to finding the book in the Shadow Court.

"Yoren." I forced a smile on my face in greeting.

The enchanter stopped just before me and bowed his head. "Your Majesty. I'm here to make the final adjustments to your spectacular outfit so that it's perfect for your big day."

Mosswhistle huffed again. "Mistress already perfect."

"Undoubtedly, undoubtedly," Yoren crooned. "But if you'll just let me..."

He swept me away from the fae standing around the mirror, ushering me onto a tree-stump pedestal lined with soft moss. A needle with a shining red thread appeared in his hands, and he deftly began making the final alterations

to the dress, pinching in the waist to make it tighter, adding a few stitches so that the crescents of material hanging from my shoulders draped slightly differently.

His hands were warm each time they brushed my skin. I recognized it as the familiar heat that tingled in my fingertips when I worked with plants. “Of course, I couldn’t clothe the first human queen of Faerie without something to remind her new subjects that she’s an enchantress...”

He pulled back, snapping the last length of thread, and the heavy, perfumed scent of roses suddenly lifted from my dress.

I gasped and moved back a step, overwhelmed by the heady fragrance. It made me feel giddy, warm—loved.

As I moved again, another waft of the floral fragrance reached my nostrils, filling me with the same comforting swell of emotion.

“A gift for Her Majesty,” Yoren said with a meaningful smile, his gaze flicking to the top of my head, although no crown would sit there until the coronation. “I hope she is pleased with all that I’ve done for her...”

I swallowed, the warm feeling quickly disappearing. The enchanter’s words held more behind them than Ferne or Mosswhistle would understand. Yoren was human, so he couldn’t hold me to any kind of faerie bargain, but still... He’d given me the crucial information I’d needed to take the crown back from Faolan—that it was Craft—and I’d promised him something in return.

A place in my Court, a position as leader of the enchanters.

I breathed out very slowly, pretending to turn and admire myself in the mirror. The gaggle of sprites returned, cooing and letting out peals of chiming laughter as they tucked away a few more wayward strands of my curls. I had to admit it, with my dark hair piled on my head and my body swathed in rose petals, I did look more like a faerie queen.

“I’m very grateful for your gift,” I said, then lowered my voice. “And, of course, I hope always to show my gratitude to those who have helped me—to be a queen who will be trusted.”

“An excellent decision, Your Majesty.” Yoren pressed his hands together, the gleaming needle that had been between his fingertips already tucked back out of sight. “I shall ensure the other enchanters hear of it.” His smile grew wider. “And perhaps—”

“Aster!” Another voice with a familiar musical timbre sounded from the doorway.

I turned, sending up another wave of the wonderful smell of roses, relieved that I could delay dealing with the promises I'd made to Yoren. For the moment, at least.

Vanna stepped toward me. The metal princess was even more elaborately dressed than usual, in a gleaming gown that pooled and flowed over her dark skin as though it were made of liquid silver. Diamonds glittered in a fine netting that covered her arms, her neck, and her shoulders and encased the mass of her black braids.

She stopped with a sigh and shot Yoren an easy smile. "What a wonderful smell—your work, I take it?" She exchanged a look with Ferne. "Which means you must be Yoren. Of course, Ferne told me plenty about you..."

"Did he really?" Yoren said lightly, although his lips thinned.

Vanna let out a soft laugh. "Oh, yes. Everything I need to know, since I hear you're eager to work closely alongside Aster." The words hung between them for a moment before she added, "And, of course, that you are the most talented tailor in the Kingdom of Faerie. Looking at Aster now, I have to agree."

This flattery seemed to appease Yoren somewhat, since he swept into a low bow. "You are too kind, Your Highness."

"I'm exactly the right amount of kind," she said crisply, stepping closer to me. "That scent is heavenly, and no one will be able to take their eyes from Aster while she's wearing this." Approval lit her face as she prowled around me, taking in the dress from every angle. Of course, Vanna was almost as serious about fae fashions as Ferne was.

"Hollow hills, Aster," she breathed. "If it wasn't for the tips of your ears, even I'd think you were fae."

Something warm glowed in my chest. That was high praise coming from one of the ethereally beautiful Court Fae. Perhaps Yoren's enchantments, along with Ferne and Mosswhistle's endless fussing over my hair and face, had created a faerie glamour that made me look passably like a fae queen.

"It's perfect," Vanna declared, shooting a smile at Ferne.

"Of course," the forest prince said simply. He lowered his voice, something like a pout creeping over his face. "But while you're here, Vanna, I must ask you about the latest Court gossip..."

A muscle feathered along Vanna's jaw. "Actually, I don't—"

"What's this I hear about your betrothal being called off?"

What?

I spun to face Vanna, eyebrows raised.

Pink spots rose on her cheeks.

“You called off your engagement to Morven?” I asked, surprised.

“It is not *called off*,” she snapped.

“Well, not by you, anyway. Or so I hear,” Ferne chuckled.

Vanna glared at him, and he held his hands aloft.

“What? I can’t pretend I’m not pleased by this turn of events.” A wolfish smile crept over his face. “I’d always heard you had a thing for the forest fae. Is that right? You can’t tell me you’d prefer that great mountain brute—”

“Morven did *not* call off the engagement,” Vanna said through gritted teeth. She exhaled through her nose, lifting her chin. “We...agreed that perhaps a match should be made for love. Not for a political allegiance that was no longer necessary between our two Courts.”

She grabbed for my arm, the rings on her long fingers pressing so hard against my skin I was sure it would bruise. “Come on, Aster,” she said sharply. “We haven’t time to answer prying questions from meddlesome forest pucks. Your family is waiting for you.”

My heart lifted, and I hurried after her.

“No, no, no!” Mosswhistle wailed from behind me, and I glanced back over my shoulder to see it scurry after me. The brownie gathered up the drifting rose petals trailing in my wake, bundling the train of my skirts in its arms and doing its best to keep the petals lying smoothly.

“See you in there, Aster,” Ferne called. “And you, too, Vanna,” he added in a low, suggestive tone.

“Come on.” Giving another yank on my arm, Vanna hurried me out of the dressing room.



Vanna stalked ahead of me along the corridor, her head held high and the countless diamonds smothering her dress glittering in the faelight.

I hurried to keep up on my shorter human legs. Mosswhistle’s clawed feet made a clacking, scurrying sound on the wooden floors as it stumbled along behind me, my skirts still gathered in its arms.

Putting on a burst of speed, I drew level with the metal princess. I didn’t say anything, but my gaze found her pinched brow, her mouth set in a firm

line.

Her honey eyes slid sideways, meeting mine. She let out a sigh.

“The engagement isn’t called off,” she said again, smoothing down the front of her dress. “Although...it’s not exactly *on* now, either.”

I remained silent, weighing my words. Vanna hadn’t welcomed Thorne’s thoughts on her engagement to Morven when we’d first found out about it. I didn’t want to offer my opinion if it wasn’t wanted.

“How...are you feeling about that?” I asked cautiously.

There was a long silence, only the clack of Vanna’s heeled shoes and the soft huffs and clattering claws of the brownie disturbing the quiet corridor.

“The Metal Court and the Mountain Court are now allies, as we wished,” she said at last. “Morven and I are friends. That’s enough to secure any political allegiance required.” Her brows knitted together. “I had my time with my mate. Morven should have the opportunity to find his and not be tied to a loveless political match.”

I winced. *Ouch.* “He said that?”

To my confusion, though, there was another long pause.

“No... I said that,” Vanna muttered in response.

She turned us down another meandering corridor of warm-colored wood, a delicate carving like brambles tangling along the length of the wall. Mosswhistle’s claws skittered against the floor as it made the sharp turn.

My brow furrowed. You could love another without a mating bond—and just because Gael had died, it didn’t mean Vanna didn’t deserve to love again—but before I could say a word, she let out another long sigh.

“He’s not the *mountain brute* I thought he was,” she admitted, her brow still furrowed. “He deserves to find his mate. It’s just, after Lonan and Faolan captured us...” She broke off with a shudder.

I winced. By the time Thorne had rescued Morven and Vanna, Lonan’s mysterious dream magic had already sunk its claws deep into Vanna’s mind.

“I didn’t think there were things worse than physical pain,” she breathed out. “But Lonan’s magic...” She broke off. “And yet, somehow, being there with Morven... He has this impossible cheerfulness about him...” She paused. “Stupidity, probably. Bloody-mindedness. But somehow it made it easier. To be there with him. At least a little...”

Another shudder wracked her body, and I shivered beside her.

I’d never seen Vanna afraid before, never seen her turn away from a battle. What must the Shadow Court have done to frighten her as much as

this?

“Will you have to see them today?” I asked tentatively. “The Shadow Court, I mean.”

Vanna let out a bitter laugh. “They have to attend the coronation. The Crown compels them to. But don’t expect any true allegiance from their Court, Aster. Not one of them has arrived yet.”

I hissed in a breath through my teeth. It didn’t surprise me to learn that the Shadow Court wasn’t about to throw a revel over my coronation. And for Vanna’s sake, I was relieved she hadn’t had to see them yet. But still...

“Are you sure they’ll show up?” I asked, worried. What would it mean if one of the Courts refused to obey the Alder Crown?

“They have to,” Vanna said again. “So yes, they’ll show up—just don’t expect much more than that.”

“And are the other Courts all here?”

Vanna shrugged. “There are substantial delegations from the Courts who sided with us against Faolan—Forest, Flower, Metal, and Mountain. But only King Isbrand is here from the Frost Court.” She blew out a breath. “It seems like the Desert Court is at least preparing to concede that they backed the wrong side. They’ve sent a small party of fae. And small delegations are here from the Sea Court and the River Court, too.”

I nodded slowly. So every Court was here apart from the Shadow Court... and I would soon have to address all of them as their queen. My mouth dried.

“Don’t look so worried.” Vanna nudged me gently with her elbow. “I’ve seen what you can handle, Aster. You more than deserve to be Queen of Faerie.”

“Mistress already queen!” Mosswhistle piped up from beneath a cloud of rose petals at my ankles.

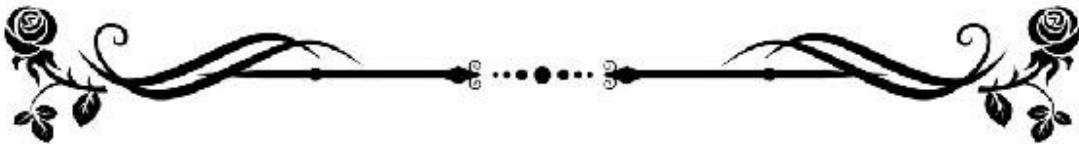
I smiled down at the brownie.

“Well, almost...” Vanna murmured.

She halted abruptly outside a door wreathed with hawthorn, bright red berries that matched my dress winking down at me.

“But first,” she said lightly, “here’s one last opportunity for you to be a Wilden.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY



“ASTER!” My father barreled towards me, arms outstretched.

I did a double take. “Dad. You look...” I trailed off, unsure how to continue.

My father was dressed in flowing, green robes that were almost more intricate than my rose dress. He wore a forest-green doublet stitched with a clever pattern of leaves, a cape of white feathers draped cavalierly over one shoulder. A headdress that appeared to be made of antlers wrapped around his head, resting on top of his ears.

He pulled me into a bone-crushing hug, then thrust me away from him.

Behind me, Mosswhistle let out a groan and hastily scurried around my skirts to repair the crushed petals at the front of my dress.

“What do you think, then?” My father beamed. He gave a slow twirl to show off his new outfit.

I pressed a hand to my chin, trying not to smile. He was wearing fae robes, standing in the middle of a fae room with a line of Little Folk waiting to attend on him, surrounded by silver platters of fine fae delicacies laid out on a table that grew directly out of the floor.

Yet somehow, he couldn’t have been more human.

Even if, with his lilac eyes that matched my own, it seemed he was responsible for the fae blood running through my veins...

“Could I pass as fae? The father of the Queen of Faerie?” He let out a barking laugh, slapping me on the shoulder.

“I mean, if Aster’s a faerie queen...” Laurel’s teasing voice came from behind my father. “I guess that makes me a princess of sorts, right?”

My gaze slid to my sister. Her outfit was the twin of my father’s, the same

stitching tracing a fine leaf pattern over the flowing, floating materials of a deep-green dress. Her red hair flamed beneath another antlered circlet sitting upon her brow.

I grinned. “Honestly, Laurie, I’m mainly surprised they got you into a dress.”

She thumped my shoulder and pulled me into a hug almost as tight as my father’s, eliciting another shrill wail from Mosswhistle.

“Away, away!” The brownie batted her leg, its cheeks darkening. “*Ruins* Mistress’s coronation gown!”

Laurel pulled back, forcing a serious expression onto her face. “I apologize, my good Mosswhistle,” she deadpanned. “You’ve done incredible work making Aster look like a queen.”

Mosswhistle’s chest puffed out. “Mistress needs no work to look like a queen,” it insisted, but its movements slowed, smoothing my petal skirts more tenderly.

Laurel’s eyes crinkled, and my dad let out a hoot of laughter, not dissimilar to the brownie’s.

“Of course she doesn’t!” he exclaimed, moving as if to hug me again then seeming to think better of it as Mosswhistle glared at him. “She’s a Wilden. There’s nothing she can’t do if she puts her mind to it.”

“What do you reckon, then, Ava?” Laurel said.

I couldn’t help noticing the forced lightness in Laurel’s tone and wondered just what I could expect from Ava today.

“I mean, you always wanted to be a fae princess,” Laurel continued in that same tone of forced cheer.

My eldest sister and father parted to reveal Ava standing behind them, her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

By comparison to the rest of my family’s fae finery, she had dressed in a tight, structured cream corset that hugged in her waist, heavy skirts layered with lace pooling onto the floor, and pearls at her throat. She stood as far away as she could get from the Little Folk, resolutely ignoring the faun repeatedly thrusting a goblet of pale wine toward her.

There was no question about the statement she was making. That she was human, not fae.

But none of that mattered.

*She tried to save my life. Twice.*

I stepped toward her, a lump in my throat.

Dealing with the aftermath of the Wild Hunt, I'd had little opportunity to speak to my sisters while we'd all still been in Rosehill. And if I was honest, I hadn't been entirely sure what to say to Ava. What could ever be enough for what she'd done? Offering herself to Lonan in my place and trying to save me from Faolan?

"Thank you," I whispered, reaching for her.

I tried not to react as she flinched back.

"Thank you," I said again, more firmly this time, "for what you did in the Folkwood. When the Shadow Court came for us." I hesitated. "You know, there was never any debt between us—"

Ava let out a stilted laugh, cutting me off. "You think that was to pay off some imagined *debt*?" she said in a stiff, cold voice. "I did it because you're my sister. We're blood."

I nodded, recognizing the words I had said to her back in Rosehill.

"Well, I just wanted to say thank you," I said again, softly. The rest of what needed to be said between us could wait until time had passed and tempers had cooled. I moved forward to hug her, then jolted to a halt. A tart, metallic scent cut through the air, my new fae senses recognizing it instantly. Slowly, my gaze roved over Ava's stiff-backed body.

It wasn't pearls hanging at her throat, but a string of painted rowan beads. And an ornate silver knife hung at her belt, covered in a vaguely familiar pattern.

"What is that?" I asked, my brow furrowing. "I can taste iron."

Ava's hand hovered over the pommel, as though I might try to take it from her. "You think I'd come here unarmed?" she scoffed. "Father gave me this for the Tithe, when I was forced to meet just *one* fae. Do you think I was going to leave it behind today, when I'm being forced to meet hundreds of them?"

Laurel let out a tense laugh. "I think your iron words are more than weapon enough, sister dearest."

"Iron words weren't enough in the Folkwood," Ava replied flatly.

I gave my sister a thin smile, taking a step back from her. Perhaps Ava and I would never see eye to eye after all that had happened. But at some point, she was going to have to get over her mistrust of the fae. Under my rule, they would be friends not foe. And things were going to change in Rosehill...

"How's everyone doing?" I asked, turning back to Laurel. "After the

Hunt.”

I had stayed in Rosehill to help as much as I could—but it had been imperative that I called the coronation and sealed the other Courts’ allegiance to me before any more harm was caused to humans around the rest of Faerie. So I’d left before the rescue operations were completed.

Laurel couldn’t meet my eyes. “There are around two dozen still unaccounted for,” she said softly, shifting into the kind of tone she used when reporting back to Dad after a difficult smuggling run through the Folkwood. “We don’t know if they’re dead or still wandering the forest.”

My insides tightened into a knot. It was weeks later now. If they were still missing...

“Even some of those who are back in Rosehill haven’t been quite the same,” she said quietly. “They’re...changed, somehow.”

I closed my eyes, forcing myself to breathe. Perhaps I could still help them in some way, like I’d helped the faesick girls all those months ago.

I exhaled. I’d go back to Rosehill after the ceremony. There was just still so much to do...

Laurel moved to the faun still badgering Ava and swept the goblet from its clawed hand. “I met with the Forest Court fae who will be returning to Rosehill with us,” she added more lightly, swirling the wine around.

“Wonderful, more fae,” Ava muttered.

Laurel took a sip and raised her eyebrows in appreciation. “They said they’ll start work clearing the trees to connect Rosehill to the rest of Faerie just as soon as the coronation’s over.”

Ava let out a strangled sound at those words, while my father let out a loud guffaw.

“Honestly, Aster.” He shook his head. “While I’m pleased Rosehill will no longer be so isolated, you’ve put a sorry end to my line of work. The town’s not going to need a smuggler anymore.”

I pulled a face at him. “A smuggler? You always insisted you were a *merchant*.”

A slow smile crept across his face. “Perhaps now I really will be.” A mischievous glint shone in his eyes. “Perhaps it’s time I expanded the old enterprise. Became an honest man.” His gaze shifted to Laurel and Ava. “After all, the world’s opening up for us. That’s bound to bring opportunity...not to mention marriage prospects for these two.”

Ava let out an even louder strangled noise while Laurel turned bright red,

choking on her wine.

A knock sounded on the door, and Vanna slipped back into the room in a gleam of silver.

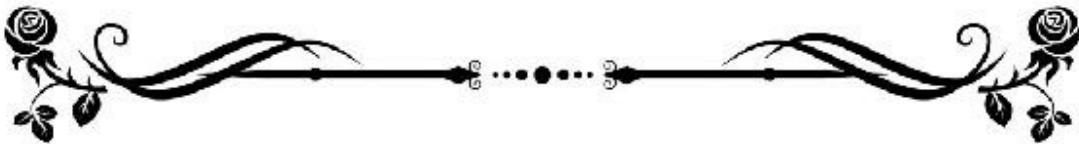
“It’s time,” she said. “Are you ready, Aster?”

I looked slowly between my father and my sisters.

“I’m ready,” I said firmly, giving her a nod.

And I was ready. It was time I at last became the Queen of Faerie.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



I STOOD before two vast closed doors, alone. Voices swelled from the other side, melodious fae murmurs, the chittering of Little Folk, and the low mutters of humans. My dress fanned out around me, the soft petals sweeping against the floor. I took a deep inhale of the rose-scented air.

Every Court in the kingdom waited for me behind that door.

Adrenaline buzzed through my body, my heart beating faster. A year ago, I hadn't known there was a world beyond Rosehill. I could never have imagined a responsibility more important than being Rosehill's greenwitch. Never pictured a kingdom as vast and beautiful and broken as the Kingdom of Faerie.

Now it was mine to rule over.

Now I had a duty to humans—and fae—not just in Rosehill, but everywhere.

I brushed my clammy hands down the petal skirt and allowed myself a small smile. I was nervous to step out in front of a crowd, but I knew feeling this emotion was normal. It was *human*.

Leaning into my emotions would make me a better queen. Thorne had taught me that.

The voices on the other side of the door quieted, then silenced. The wooden doors glided open, and I took another deep breath before stepping outside, into the woodland clearing beyond.

It was dusk, the sky overhead pale and darkening.

Thousands of eyes stared at me. Some were black and beady, others wide and lustrous, yet others reassuringly human. Most were clustered on the forest floor, but many smaller fae perched on the branches of the trees above,

while tiny, winged creatures flitted through the air in between drifting blossom petals, trying to find the best spot to watch.

Silk banners fluttered from the surrounding trees, the branches strung through with garlands of spring flowers and faelights that glowed softly like stars, brightening the dim evening light.

I stepped forward, my bare feet sinking into a carpet of rich moss underfoot, in between swaths of fragrant bluebells.

The crowd parted before me, a long aisle appearing through the onlookers like the Tithe path splitting the forest.

I moved slowly along the path, trying not to rush despite the heat tingling through my body, the patter of my heart. I kept my chin tilted high, my shoulders pressed back. My gaze pinned on the raised dais, where the Flower Court and Forest Court had created a bower worthy of a Faerie Queen.

A single fae stood waiting for me there.

Thorne.

He smiled, his hands clasped behind his back, pride radiating from him, and my nerves melted away. Our bond tugged me toward him with each step. He was safety and strength and home.

I hitched my skirts in my hands, climbing the large toadstool steps up to the dais as I turned to face the crowd. My people.

Fae horns blared.

“Gentlefolk.” Queen Calla’s voice carried through the clearing. “Welcome to the Forest Court, and to the coronation of your new Alder Queen.”

A patter of applause rose from the humans, accompanied by a swell of fae voices.

Thorne moved before me and lowered himself to the ground, kneeling lithely.

My heart fluttered to see him gazing up at me. I had never seen him kneel to anybody, not even his father.

He held out a pine-green cushion, the Alder Regalia laid out on top. The crown whispered to me, as it always did when I wasn’t wearing it.

“You don’t need to kneel before me.” My own whisper joined those of past kings and queens.

“It’s only right that I kneel before my queen,” Thorne replied solemnly.

Five small, green woodsprites flitted out from behind Thorne, picking up the crown between them and flying to place it on my head.

“Queen Aster has earned the right to wear the Alder Crown,” Queen Calla continued.

Firm spokes of bone pressed against my temples, the whispers quieting.

“And not only does Queen Aster wear the crown, but she wields the two other long-forgotten items of the Alder Regalia.”

Murmurs rippled through the crowd as the woodsprites returned to place the cool glass orb in one hand and the scepter in my other. I held them aloft for the fae to see, for them to *feel*.

“And now, the allegiance ceremony will begin.” Queen Calla moved around into my line of sight, accompanied by Ferne and Ivye.

“The Forest Court swears allegiance to the Alder Queen,” Queen Calla announced loudly, her dress of leaves brushing across the ground as they all took one knee.

The fae couldn’t lie. Their words bound them to me. Thorne didn’t break eye contact with me as he stood slowly, sending my pulse racing. While the rest of the Forest Court royals moved to the side of the dais, he came to stand at my side, a little way behind me.

“Just nine more to go, petal.” Amusement laced his voice and settled my nerves.

The Flower Court came first in a shower of delicate blossom petals.

“The Flower Court swears allegiance to the Alder Queen,” sweet, light voices chorused.

Vanna and her parents stepped up next, each drawing a glittering sword to lay at my feet as they swore their allegiance. They were swiftly followed by Morven and the rest of his fur-clad family stepping up, then bending the knee. He gave Vanna a knowing smile as he passed her on the way back.

Then the wet slithers of the next fae retinue flowed toward me, cresting in a wave of shimmering, iridescent scales.

A familiar, redhead princess stared up at me, her aqua eyes piercing as they slid to the sea glass orb in my hand. A large, muscled man with long, white hair and a thick beard, tendrils moving as if they were floating underwater, stood beside her. From the spiky seashell crown on his head, I guessed this must be Sereia’s father, the sea king.

For a moment, the sea princess looked at me, then she knelt at the same time as her father, before the rest of her Court lowered like a tide.

“The Sea Court swears allegiance to the Alder Queen,” the sea king spoke, his voice the thunderous crash of waves against rock.

As he rose and moved away, Sereia lingered for a second longer. “I do not forget your promise to me, my queen.”

“I have not forgotten it either,” I replied in a low voice, my heart hammering. Someone else I still owed a debt to.

Her lips lifted. “Then I look forward to our future discussions.”

I inclined my head slightly in what I hoped was a regal nod. The Court politics were only just beginning.

The River Court knelt next, followed by stone-faced representatives from the Desert and Frost Courts whose gazes fixed on the crown on my head before they disappeared back into the crowd in a spit of flame and flurry of snowflakes.

Whispers filled the clearing as the light overhead flared brighter, and a cloud of glowing fae flew over the crowd toward me. Thorne tensed, a wash of shadows emanating from him in my periphery.

The Sky Court.

But the blue-eyed blonde at their helm was no longer Faolan. Instead, his sister Aurora touched down lightly before the dais, her long, peach hair braided into a crown around her head, live white butterflies perched in her tresses, their wings fluttering gently.

My chest tightened as sunlight bathed my face.

Aurora had been a friend at the Sky Court...but that was before I had cursed her brother and taken the Alder Crown from her Court. I had no idea what she felt towards me now.

Her wings stilled as she knelt before me, her sheer dress the delicate pale blues and pinks of dawn. The rest of the Sky Court royals followed her lead, although many had steely glints in their eyes.

“The Sky Court swears allegiance to the Alder Queen,” Aurora intoned in her sweet, husky voice.

Most of the Sky Court dispersed quickly, the hum of their wings filling the air. But Aurora remained a moment longer, pressing a hand to her heart.

“Thank you for showing him mercy,” she said in a low voice. “It brings me great peace knowing he has the chance to change.”

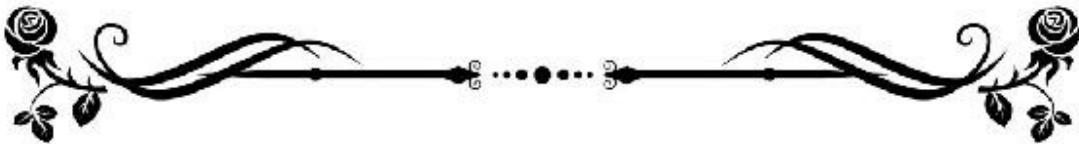
I nodded, my breath sticking in my throat.

As long as Aurora was leading them, it seemed that I could consider the Sky Court allies.

She fluttered away and, with that, there was only one Court left to swear their allegiance.

The Shadow Court.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO



MY SHOULDERS TENSED as I scanned the crowd. There was still no sign of any of the dark brothers who'd cornered us in the Folkwood, no curl of black smoke or shadows creeping around the clearing in a way that they shouldn't.

All of a sudden, a wash of panic hit me, the fear for my sisters I'd felt during the Wild Hunt twisting in my gut.

My gaze snapped to where Laurel and my father watched proudly from the side of the dais. But where was Ava? I couldn't see the flash of her cream dress beside them. Her gaze could sear through me like a hot blade, but there were no narrowed lilac eyes scowling in my direction, no haughty, upturned face reminding me that she was still furious with me for lying to her.

She wasn't there. She wasn't—

A mist of black smoke appeared before me, and Lonan stepped out of the air, not at the base of the dais like the others, but a breath away from me. Ava wasn't with him, either.

My stomach dropped.

Had he done something to her?

My head jerked back to where my family watched from the side of the dais—and I loosed a breath.

This time, I could see Ava staring up at me, too, her human dress sticking out like a sore thumb in the middle of the forest fae surrounding her.

*Thank Folk.* I steadied my breath, the frantic pounding of my heart returning to its usual beat.

She must have been with them the whole time. I was probably still jittery after Faolan had taken my sisters for his Wild Hunt. My heart steeled against the dark fae before me, who'd tried to claim us as his prize in the Folkwood,

who'd shown up late for the coronation.

Lonan's white hair flowed around his curved horns, his statuesque face frozen in fury.

"Just you, today, Lonan?" I asked lightly.

Lonan didn't respond, his face a mask. But I could see the challenge in his amethyst eyes, in his knife-edged posture.

The Alder Crown began to whisper, and Lonan's gaze darted up to my brow, as if he could hear the voices, too. Perhaps he could, if the crown was compelling him to be here.

I smiled at him.

I was his queen, whether he liked it or not.

"Kneel." I spoke calmly and clearly, and the whispers of the crown flowed beneath my words like a shadow. "Kneel and swear allegiance to your queen."

Lonan's back leg spasmed, dropping down to the ground with a thud. He quickly masked the involuntary movement, sweeping one arm before him and turning it into an insolent, overblown gesture. "The Shadow Court swears allegiance to the Alder Queen." His voice was silk, cold and low with menace, twining through the crowd like smoke.

He stood sharply. "For now," he added softly, then darkness swelled around him before he vanished.

I let loose another breath, my fingers slowly unclenching.

"Shame he couldn't stay," Thorne drawled from beside me, although fury laced his words. "He'd *love* what's about to come next."

I smiled. The fae Courts had all bent the knee...but I'd invited human representatives today, too. Some of the Tithe servants, and Yoren, on behalf of the enchanters. Thorne told me it was the first time humans had ever been included in a coronation, and, while the crown didn't affect them, I needed the fae to see that I was treating my fellow humans the same as I was treating them. That they were equals. A new Court in the Kingdom of Faerie.

The chime of fae voices echoed around the room as the human delegates knelt before me.

Then there was just one final faery whom I wanted to call up to the dais...

"Before I begin my declarations," I spoke loudly, over the whispers still filling the air, "there is someone else who deserves notice. Mosswhistle, will you come here?" My gaze roamed the crowd for the brownie, who I knew wouldn't be far away.

Sure enough, it shuffled forward after a few moments, black eyes wider than ever. The brownie trotted forward then pressed itself flat against the floor at my feet, nose squished into the ground. “Mosswhistle swears allegiance to Mistress,” it squeaked, voice muffled.

I knelt down so we were level, my skirts spilling out around me.  
“You’re not here to swear allegiance.”

The brownie stood, and Thorne leaned down to hand me the enchantment I’d made yesterday. I held out a chain of flowers, including both daisies and my namesake—asters—and Mosswhistle’s eyes gleamed at the sight. Vanna had laced the stems with gold so it looked as fine as jewelry. And the enchantment would ensure that the brownie was protected from physical harm whenever it wore the flowers.

“Not only do I have friends among the Court Fae, but one of my bravest and most loyal friends is one of the Little Folk. Like the humans, the Little Folk have no Court of their own, but it is important that their voices are heard.”

Excited squeaks and hoots and chiming voices rose from the Little Folk present.

“I hereby appoint Mosswhistle to the newly created position of Royal Ambassador to the Little Folk.”

Mosswhistle pressed its spindly hands to its chest. “Mosswhistle helps Mistress?” Its voice wavered.

“If you’ll accept?”

The brownie nodded, tears shimmering in its black eyes as I placed the golden daisy chain around its neck. “It is the honor of Mosswhistle’s life.”

I stood as Mosswhistle left the dais, ripping up chunks of moss from the ground to absorb its tears.

I brushed my hands down my skirts. That was everyone. All of the Courts, the enchanters, the humans—now even the Little Folk. The only fae or humans not represented today were the solitary wildfolk, who were part of no Court, who had no king or queen among them, who dwelled in the in-between places. But I would figure that out later.

It was time to make my first official decree.

I cleared my throat, my nerves disappearing and replaced by excitement, urgency. A feeling of destiny.

This was what it had all been for.

“Gentlefolk...and humanfolk,” I began, looking around the room. “As my

first law as your Alder Queen, I decree that *all* humans are free. No one can be owned, sold, ensorcelled, or harmed by the fae.”

Loud noises rose through the room, happy exclamations from the retinue of humans and a mixed reaction from the fae. I spoke again, and the voices faded. “There will be no more Tithes—*however*, humans may willingly volunteer their Craft at fae Courts, as long as they do this of their own free will and are fairly compensated for their services.” I thought of Vanna’s Court, of the humans who wanted to work there.

I turned to where the freed Tithe servants stood. “Fae need us for our Craft, and fae can help us with their magic. We can build a better kingdom—*queendom*,” I corrected myself with a smile, “on a system built on mutual respect.”

I held out a hand to Thorne. “In the First Court, a human and a fae ruled together as equals. When Prince Thorne and I marry, we will do the same.”

Thorne stepped to my side, slipping his hand into mine.

The crown whispered beneath my next words, a rush of conviction flowing through me. “From this day forward, under our rule, all fae and humans are considered equal.”

## EPILOGUE



A SPRING SUN kissed the back of my neck and my shoulders, warming the dark waves of hair flowing down my back. I breathed in the scent of sun-baked earth, grass beneath my feet, and—I hoped—new growth.

I stooped over the roses, my fingers skimming the stems and leaves before lingering on one of the tight buds. The petals were already soft to touch, narrowing to points at the end. I'd planted roses in every color, and this one was a delicate peach.

Dropping the bud and stepping back, I reached for my watering can. My stomach knotted as I poured a heavy shower of water over the mulch covering the roots, gardening not calming my nerves for once.

Today was a big day, but unlike for the coronation, I'd chosen to wear a simple white dress of cotton and lace...and I was trying my hardest not to get it muddy.

Still, I had to do *something* to distract myself from my nerves. And so I'd come automatically to the roses, which I'd been tending very carefully over the past few weeks in the cottage.

It had been slow going, stopping to inspect each plant in turn, pruning any canes that looked brown or damaged, examining the leaves for signs of mildew, and seeing how close I thought the flowers were to opening. But it was important I do it this way. This was the kind of attention you spent on something you loved.

And these roses were growing with a new enchantment sewn into them:

true love, and not a curse.

From *these* roses, I would make a new crown—that would let the Alder King or Queen rule the fae using love, not fear, and life, not death, like I had always intended. That wouldn’t drain their life over the course of their rule or require a successor to kill for the right to rule.

Only, this time, I was making two crowns.

One for me and one for Thorne. One for the humans, and one for the fae.

But first, the two of us had an important human ceremony to complete...

I set the watering can back down on the grass, my gaze roaming the rest of the cottage garden. Focusing almost exclusively on the roses had meant that the other plants had been a little neglected—but there was a kind of wild beauty to the tumbling flowers and weeds lining the borders.

And I was sure it would make the perfect setting for the imminent ceremony.

The daylight was already fading, but lanterns had been strung up around the garden, giving off a faint, golden glow. Down the center of the lawns, a few white-painted chairs had been lined up, an aisle running down their middle.

I swallowed, butterflies suddenly dancing in my stomach.

*In hardly any time at all, I'll be walking down that aisle...*

“Mistress!” Mosswhistle’s squeaking voice drew my attention away from the decorations. “Guests are arriving. Must return to the cottage now.” The enchanted daisy chain I’d made the brownie hung over a bright-green tunic of moss, a cape of leaves slung over one shoulder.

“Okay,” I said, even as my blood thrummed beneath my skin, my palms growing damp. “Let’s head inside.”

I cast one final look at the roses and allowed the brownie to lead me back into the cottage. We’d named it now. Sage Cottage. Smoke rolled from the chimney, the stone turned gold in the evening light.

The quiet of the garden vanished the moment we set foot into the kitchen. Little Folk dashed around everywhere, platters of food lining every surface, small, woven baskets of petals lined up on the floor. I’d wanted something simple, but of course, when the fae were involved, everything had to be beautiful...

“Aster!” Laurel squealed. “Mosswhistle said you’d already slipped outside!” My sister suddenly appeared, and, grabbing hold of my shoulders, she steered me firmly out of the kitchen and up to my bedroom.

Grasping a comb in one hand, she began raking it through my hair. Needlessly, since I'd brushed it a hundred times already this morning until the loose waves gleamed. I guessed she was looking for something to do, too.

"Dad will knock when it's time," she said in a voice tight with emotion. "Ava's already heading out there, with Thorne's family."

My heart squeezed, a tenderness flooding through me.

*She came.* After how Ava had responded to the fae arriving in Rosehill, I hadn't been sure she would.

"I'll go ahead of you," Laurel continued, still in that same, breathy way. "And then...you'll be married." She promptly burst into tears.

I twisted to face her, my eyes wide with surprise. "Laurel..." My eldest sister rarely cried at anything. Let alone anything like a *wedding*. "What..?"

She forced a smile through her tears. "It's just, this is it, isn't it? You'll live here with Thorne, or you'll be at the Forest Court, being Queen of Faerie... We'll never see you."

A lump formed in my chest. "Laurie," I said fiercely, gripping her hands. "You're my family. And Rosehill is my home." Tears pricked at my own eyes, my voice wavering as I continued, "I'm not going to just disappear."

She squeezed my hands, tears still rolling down her cheeks, before pulling me into a tight hug.

A knock sounded at the door before my father pressed into the room, his eyes already red-rimmed. One look at the two of us and he was blowing his nose loudly into a large handkerchief.

"Aster... You look beautiful." His eyes reddened again as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

Beside us, Laurel blew her nose, too, then straightened up. "I'll go ahead and let everyone know you're heading down," she mumbled before rushing out of the door.

My father gave me a soft look, taking in my simple white dress, my loose hair.

"You're just missing one thing..." Reaching past me, he plucked a single rose from a vase on my dresser and tucked it into my hair. "There." He beamed through his tears. "Now you look perfect. Shall we go?"

The tapping of my heart grew faster again.

*This is really it.*

"Thanks, Dad," I whispered.

"Mistress!" Mosswhistle's long nose poked around the door. "Everyone

is waiting!"

I gripped my father's arm.

"Ready, Aster?" he murmured to me.

I gave a firm nod, and the three of us headed downstairs and back out of the cottage.

Outside, the lanterns glowed softly under the last of the day's sun, and as we appeared, some of Rosehill's musicians began to pick out a gentle tune.

The small number of guests we'd invited to witness our wedding—Vanna, Thorne's family and mine—all swiveled in their chairs to look at me.

And then my gaze moved to the fae prince waiting for me at the end of the aisle.

My heart caught in my throat.

When we were in Court, Thorne had at last abandoned his usual black for forest-green finery. Today, he wore a loose, cream shirt tucked into brown pants, a pine-green cape hanging from his shoulders. His dark hair was tousled, and his eyes widened as he saw me.

Happiness soaked into me like spring sunshine.

This was all I could ever wish for.

Mosswhistle trotted down the aisle in front of us, enthusiastically scattering handfuls of petals on the ground from a basket nestled in the crook of its elbow. I clung to my father's arm as we walked slowly down the aisle between the fae and human guests, and then he gave my hand a final squeeze.

I took the last few steps alone, stopping just beside Thorne. My heart rattled against my ribcage as the heat of his body hit me, his dancing hazel eyes finding mine.

"Hello, petal," he breathed, a smile playing around his lips.

I smiled shyly back up at him, my cheeks warming. "Hello, beast."

He reached out a hand and slowly tucked a strand of hair back behind my ear, making me shiver.

The ceremony was a simple one. I'd wanted the same handfasting ritual every married couple in Rosehill had on their wedding day. The officiant took my hand and placed it in Thorne's, wrapping a soft, silken cord around our linked palms.

"I vow to protect and love you." Thorne's rich voice was low as he spoke the words, and the ribbon brushed over my fingers. "As our hands are bound together, so are our hearts and lives. From this moment, forever."

The cord looped around us again.

I smiled up at him, my voice slightly breathless. “I vow to protect and love you. As our hands are bound together, so are our hearts and lives. From this moment, forever.”

The instant I finished speaking, Thorne’s free hand slid down around my waist—then suddenly, he dipped me backward.

I tilted my chin as he leaned closer. “You’re not supposed to kiss me yet,” I whispered.

His lips lifted, canines flashing. “When have I ever done what I’m supposed to do?”

My heart fluttered as he brushed his lips against mine, my body turning hot and loose as he kissed me. I kissed him back, our bound hands pressed between us, our soul-bond bringing us even closer. Warmth blossomed through me, followed by a sense of quiet comfort.

Now we were mates, husband and wife—queen and king.

A rich, floral scent perfumed the air around us.

I straightened, smiling, still wrapped in Thorne’s arms as I looked past our families to the garden beyond.

The roses were all turned toward us, as if we were the sun.

And every single one had bloomed.

## The End



## THANKS FOR READING

Dear reader,

Thank you so much for reading *A Promise of Thorns*. We hope you've enjoyed Aster and Thorne's adventures. And Mosswhistle's adventures, of course—how could we forget the *real* star of this series?

Co-writing *A Court of Fairy Tales* has been so much fun. *Beauty and the Beast* is one of our all-time favorite fairy tales, and so writing a story that combined that “tale as old as time” with our love of plants, fae, and a witchy, cottage-core aesthetic has been a blast.

While we're sad to say goodbye to Aster, we have plenty more fairy tale retellings that we'd love to explore. You may have picked up on some Easter eggs throughout these books... And if you're new to our writing, then we have a whole other series that might be right up your street.

Our completed *Desert Nights* series is inspired by Aladdin and the Arabian Nights fairy tales—think snarky genies, evil viziers, feisty princesses, thieves, and sultans.

We've included the first two chapters on the next page if you'd like to try it out!

### Want to help us out?

If you enjoyed this book, we'd love it if you left us a review on Amazon or shared the series with your book-loving friends. These reviews and word-of-mouth recommendations help more people find our books and we are always

so grateful for every single one.

Thank you again for reading,  
Helena and Elm

# THRONE OF SAND

## CHAPTER ONE



*Today I must leave the palace to marry my sister's betrothed.*

She should have been the one sitting here, surrounded by fussing attendants.

I kept still and malleable as a doll while my handmaids brushed, painted, and dressed me, letting them fuss without complaint. After all, Lalana was the princess who was promised, not me.

It was a scalding hot day, even in the cooler confines of the marble palace. The gauzy curtains strung across the balcony hung limp in the still air and did little to keep the midday heat at bay. Sweat curled the dark hairs around my brow and at the nape of my neck as Mehri raked a comb through my hair. The girl in the large, golden mirror stared back at me, her head jerking slightly with each stroke of the comb as it snagged on the knots.

I already hardly recognized her.

Mehri blocked my view, a small pot of black paint in her hand. “Would you close your eyes for a moment, Princess Zadie?”

I dutifully obeyed and she ran a wet brush across my eyelids.

Today, I would leave the palace, my parents, and my kingdom, Khiridesh, forever. I would journey to the neighboring Kingdom of Astaran to meet my betrothed for the first time, a distant, powerful sultan. It was my chance to become sultanah, my chance to rule.

I just had to live up to my sister's reputation as the greatest beauty in the twelve kingdoms first.

I kept my eyes closed, letting these facts wash over me like wind over the dunes. Soft brushes stroked my face, some painting my cheeks and lips, another running down either side of my nose. My *Khirideshi nose*, as Mother

always labeled it. Just like my father's, it was my most prominent feature and I loved it – even if my mother thought it made me look too proud.

To meet my new husband, I had been dressed in a fine silk turquoise dress over pants, embellished with whorls of real gold embroidery at the hem and cuffs. A sapphire from the royal treasury hung at my throat, large as a fig, now part of my dowry. Although it glistened and sparkled, it weighed heavy as a manacle around my neck.

“Done,” Mehri announced, the lick of the brush lifting from my face.

I opened my eyes, staring back at the girl in the mirror.

Black, feline flicks framed my dark eyes, and my thick brows had been tamed. I tilted my face to one side. Even my nose appeared smaller. I looked down at the assorted jars and brushes scattered across the dresser. *What sorcery is this?*

“Zadie!” Mother’s voice rang out through the chamber.

I stifled a groan. *Great.*

My mother glided into the room on slippers feet, making a beeline straight for me. At least five different amulets and talismans swayed around her neck. Not a day went by that my mother wasn’t adorned with some kind of magical protection, but this seemed extreme, even for her. Apparently she felt as confident about today as I did.

My father, the sultan, strode in a few seconds behind her. His silk robes and feathered turban, both in royal Khirideshi red, were ones he usually reserved for feast days. His beard was neatly trimmed and oiled, his lips pressed together, his face stern.

“The convoy is almost here to collect you.” Mother glanced toward the balcony, as if she could see them making their way along the streets of Satra through the thin, wispy curtains. “How are we getting on?”

Mehri and the other handmaids fussing around me didn’t answer, instead dropping into respectful curtseys on either side of the dressing table and allowing the sultanah to inspect me.

She gripped my chin between her fingers, tilting my face toward hers. Her long, dark hair was coiled and pinned carefully on top of her head, and in that moment, my heart twisted painfully.

She looked so much like Lalana. More than I ever would.

Sweat beaded on the edges of my forehead, then Mother let go with an inhale that swelled her whole chest. “Leave us.”

The handmaids scurried from the room without so much as a backward

glance.

I faced the mirror once more. Mother and Father stood behind me, a parent at each shoulder. I felt even hotter than before.

“You don’t need us to tell you how important today is, Zadie,” my father began. Why did I get the feeling he was going to tell me anyway?

“I know, Father. I—”

“This match with the Sultan of Astaran is an imperative political alliance.”

“I know. I— *Ouch*,” I complained, flinching as Mother pinned my veil to my head with some force.

“Kassim may be a young sultan, but Astaran is a powerful kingdom,” Father continued, his voice deep and level as he paced behind us. “Through the strength of their army, as well as their strategic alliances, Astaran has kept peace for years. When you marry the sultan—”

“Our kingdoms will be united,” I finished, parroting the words I knew so well. “We’ll become allies in case of war. It will open up the eastern frankincense trade route and Astaran’s port, which will increase the affluence of both kingdoms. I know, Father.”

I had read about the Kingdom of Astaran long before Lalana had been betrothed to the sultan. Rumor had it that Sultan Kassim had a female vizier advising him, and that since he’d come to power, he let women enroll in his armies. I hoped he would be a sultan who let his sultanah rule alongside him, like some of the more progressive kingdoms did.

Hope fluttered in my chest, then I scrunched my face as Mother finished pinning the veil in place. It was the same vibrant turquoise as my dress and pants, and while it looked light as butterfly wings, it weighed heavily on my head.

“Now, we don’t need you talking about politics in front of Sultan Kassim’s men,” she said. “They won’t want to hear your thoughts on kingdom relations or trade routes. That’s not what they were promised. We need them to spread word of your obedience, your modesty, and your... beauty. Just act less like yourself and more like...”

*Lalana.*

My shoulders slumped. “I get it. No political talk,” I grumbled, tugging at the veil. “Unless it’s appropriate.”

“No political talk, *period*.” Mother slapped my hand away. “No talk about horses or books or history or wars.”

“Listen, Zadie.” My father’s cheeks turned pink. “Your entire life, you’ve been able to do as you wish. Learn what you want. Read and ride. As second daughter, we let you have that freedom. I now see we let you have *too much* freedom. But remember, when the Sultan of Astaran was looking for a wife, he chose Lalana, a princess who was interested in etiquette, not education.”

Mother nodded earnestly. “Remember, if in doubt, *silence* is the best route. And, spirits above, no speaking—”

“Unless I’m spoken to first. I *know*.”

“And most important of all,” My father walked around so he could look into my eyes. “The sultan must believe Lalana is dead.”

My heart thudded painfully in my chest. “I would never—”

“No, Zadie.” He scolded me like a child. “You helped your sister run away. To abandon her duties and mantle for *love*.” He exhaled slowly, then moved behind me and placed his hands on my shoulders. They pressed down against the flowing veil, pulling it taut around my head. “Now it’s your duty to pick up that mantle. To take responsibility for what you’ve done.” Our eyes met in the mirror and his voice softened. “To become the sultanah she should have been.”

I dropped my gaze first.

Did I regret helping Lalana escape to Yadina, to be with the man she loved? I knew once she’d met Ambar, she would never have been happy with this arranged marriage, despite the fact she’d been groomed for such a match her whole life. It still staggered me that she chose a merchant of magical objects over a sultan, to spend her life peddling amulets and talismans instead of ruling from within a palace.

She had always been the great beauty, the master of all the womanly arts, perfect in every way – except one. She’d fallen in love with the wrong man.

And now we all had to pretend she was dead.

Mother jabbed a heavy gold earring through one ear, then the other. They tugged at my lobes.

No. I didn’t regret helping Lalana at all. She had wanted to marry her merchant...and I had wanted to be sultanah. I’d been given an opportunity I never thought I would get as the younger, plainer, wilder daughter. Here, in Khiridesh, power still passed down the male line, so my little brother, Umar, would become sultan. By seeing through this important political alliance, I would get to become the ruler I never could be if I stayed here.

And I would be a *good* sultanah. I might have little interest in love or

marrying some strange sultan, but I had studied *Orhan's Ethics of Law* and *Sultanah Bena's Manifesto on Kingdom Alliances*.

I just had to prove myself a passable princess first.

Mother picked up a bottle of perfume and spritzed it generously around my head and body.

“Stop... Ugh.” I coughed, waving my hand through the heady fog of jasmine and oud that made my eyes water. It was a deep, rich scent better suited to an older woman, not an eighteen-year-old girl.

The glass bottle clinked as my mother set it down and stepped back, her hands clasped above her heart. She shook her head as she looked at me, rubbing her lips together nervously.

“It’ll have to do...” She looked up at the sultan with real worry etched across her fine features. “Do you think it’ll do?”

My underarms and the backs of my knees started to sweat even worse than before. I stood up, twisting to check it hadn’t stained.

I swallowed down the lump of anxiety building in my throat. “I need some water or something.” My mouth felt dry as the desert.

Hasita, one of our long-suffering handmaids, burst through the doors.

“Ah, Hasita. Perfect timing,” I called out, a hand covering my parched throat. “Could you get me some water or—”

“Your Majesties.” Hasita hastened toward us, then dropped into a harried curtsey. Her grey hair was damp with sweat, her already lined brow creased further with worry. “I need to speak with you both about a matter of great urgency.” She flashed a look in my direction, but the request was aimed at my parents.

The sultan and sultanah nodded and stepped closer to her, out of earshot.

I ground my teeth. Why would *I* need to be involved in any of these conversations? I’m only, you know, the *bride*.

I exhaled through my nose, trying to compose myself. I couldn’t stand comfortably, my fine outfit prickling where it touched my skin, but I couldn’t sit, either, because I was sweating like a market pig in the midday heat.

I paced the warm, marble floor, the material of my skirts rustling, my jeweled slippers click-clacking with each step as I stomped and whirled back and forth in front of the dressing table.

Surely *someone* could get me something to eat or drink. I could nibble on a date without disturbing all the carefully applied makeup. Spirits, I hadn’t eaten all day, and I was so thirsty, my tongue felt like it was coated in sand.

A persistent fly buzzed around my head, probably attracted to all the sweet-smelling oils and lotions glistening on my skin, and I swatted a hand through the air in frustration. I'd never felt more uncomfortable. I scratched at my hairline underneath the veil. This day couldn't get any worse.

Mother shrieked and my head snapped in my parents' direction, the earrings batting against my neck. Father held my mother upright as she half-slumped against him, clutching at her amulets and swooning as if in a faint.

"What's wrong?" I took a step toward them.

"Light the incense braziers in the throne room," Mother muttered in a daze, ordering no one in particular. She still sagged heavily against my father. "Fetch Umar. Polish the silver, and...and kill a bird. Kill *five*. We must prepare the finest...the finest..."

Father looked back at me, as if only just remembering I was in the room. "It's the sultan." His brow furrowed. "He came with the convoy. He's here."

# THRONE OF SAND

## CHAPTER TWO



“He’s outside...”

The murmur rippled through the servants as Mother hissed orders to prepare the throne room. They threw open the shutters to let in thick shafts of golden light and lit the braziers, filling the room with wafts of heady incense.

I had been told to sit on one of the cushioned thrones and not move, an order I was only too happy to obey as I watched the last of the flustered servants and guards darting about like ants, dragging out chests of gold and jewels to display.

*The dowry.*

I draped the veil over my face. The sheer, turquoise material turned the golden-hued room cool and hazy, like diving deep underwater.

Two handmaids rushed in with my younger brother, Umar, and sat him down beside Father. The throne was far too big for him, his five-year-old legs dangling over the edge without touching the floor. He gave me a happy wave, and I waved back. He was too young to understand what was going on, but seemed excited to be involved. I only hoped he wouldn’t mention Lalana in front of the sultan.

Mother fussed with Umar’s hair, then slowly sank into her chair, casting one last glance around the room to make sure everything was in place. Father, sitting on the grandest throne between them, nodded to the guards. The vast doors groaned as they were opened.

Immediately, the noise of the Astarian convoy flooded into the room. The grounds of the palace were filled with trumpeting elephants and whinnying horses. The sound of hollering guards and gasping spectators from the city was deafening.

The soft cushion slid around beneath me as I shifted in my seat. Two guards dressed in traditional white-and-gold Astarian livery appeared in the doorway, then a third man strode in between them. His silhouette cut an imposing figure, and the babble of the crowd outside fell to a hush.

“The Sultan of Astaran,” announced one of his guards. The words echoed across the smooth, marble surfaces of the throne room.

Flanking the marble columns, our guards stood at attention, a long line of red turbans and glinting scimitars lining the way from the door to the thrones. The Sultan of Astaran strode past them, his shining boots ringing out with each step.

I held my breath. This was the man I was to marry.

He stood before my father and removed his jeweled turban, letting shoulder-length dark hair fan out around his face.

I almost gasped, but caught myself at the last moment.

Even through the veil, the sultan was beautiful. Lalana levels of beautiful. And young. Far younger than I’d expected. My stomach gave an involuntary flip as I took in his clean-shaven face, his impeccable robes of rich sapphire blue.

Would my sister have changed her mind if she’d met the sultan first? Would she have been bewitched by those famous royal Astarian eyes that glowed amber in the sunlight? What a pair they would have made.

But he was here to marry me, not Lalana. I was not some giddy girl with dreams of love and handsome princes.

My heart swelled with hope once more that he would be the kind of sultan to embrace a wife who ruled beside him.

“Sultan Shapur.” The Sultan of Astaran inclined his head to my father, an unnecessary display of respect considering they were both sultans and he was a guest.

A bead of sweat edged its way down my neck, itching my skin as it went. I reached under my veil and brushed it away under the guise of readjusting my necklace.

“Please, Sultan Kassim.” My father stood from the throne and stepped down level with him. “It is our honor to welcome you to Satra and to Khiridesh.” He introduced my mother, who stood and swept into a low and gracious curtsey. The kind I could never quite muster.

“And this is my son, Prince Umar, heir to the Khirideshi throne.” The Sultan of Astaran inclined his head to my brother, who smiled amiably.

I frowned beneath my veil. *Of course, my five-year-old brother gets introduced to the sultan before his future bride.*

“Sultan, we are so very happy to have the unexpected pleasure of your visit.” Mother rose from what seemed like the longest curtsey of all time.

The sultan gave her a warm smile, and she seemed to flush a little under his gaze. “Since there was a...last-minute change in our arrangement, my vizier suggested I might like to come and greet the princess in person.” He dipped his head. “I am so sorry for the loss of your eldest daughter.”

Mother’s eyes swam with real tears. “You are very kind. As you have seen, the streets of Satra are still in mourning.”

The sultan’s gaze ran over my mother’s bright green clothes, then flicked to Father’s and Umar’s ruby outfits. None could be considered traditional mourning attire.

Mother seemed to realize this at the same time he did. “We decided we could not dwell in mourning today, not when our youngest daughter will be making so happy a match.” She led him toward me. “Please, let me introduce you to our daughter, and your bride, Scheherazade.”

*Oh spirits.*

My whole body felt clammy. All my mother’s instructions flew from my mind. Should I stand or remain seated? What should I say? Should I say nothing? I was suddenly very grateful for the material hiding my face. I hoped my makeup hadn’t rubbed off.

Mother swept back my veil. I blinked at the change in light and looked up, meeting the sultan’s silent gaze.

His eyes roamed my face, then farther down my body. Heat rose to my cheeks. If any other man had dared look at me like that... But there was something cool and disinterested about it, like he was appraising the contents of a treasure chest.

I clasped my hands together in my lap and sat up straight, waiting.

“Princess Scheherazade.” The sultan bowed stiffly.

I lifted my chin. “Please, call me Zadie. Everyone does.” My voice was steady, despite the tight feeling in my throat.

Mother glared at me. I didn’t know what she was worried about. I’d followed her rules, hadn’t I? I’d waited to speak until I was spoken to.

“Pleased to meet you, Zadie. My name is Kassim,” the sultan replied formally. My name sounded foreign on his lips and sent a cold shiver down my legs, despite the heat. How could this strange, polite sultan be my

betrothed?

He turned away.

*Is that it? A brief introduction and he's done with me?*

“I’m sorry for appearing unannounced. I’m usually one to adhere to tradition.” Kassim smiled pleasantly at my parents. “I just thought, considering the circumstances, it would be beneficial for both parties to meet.”

“Of course.” Father smiled back at Kassim. “Are you sure you won’t stay the night? I can have the royal chambers prepared.”

“I don’t plan to put you or your wife out any more than I already have. I shall return with the convoy today to escort Princess Zadie to Kisrabah, as planned.”

I frowned. With so much treasure to be moved, I thought the convoy would have been a covert, heavily guarded affair. But with the sultan riding with us, and judging from the sounds of the elephants and the admiring throng outside, it appeared they had chosen to arrive with full pomp and ceremony. We’d attract far more attention than I’d thought.

“Will more of your soldiers meet us at the Khiridesh-Astaran border?” I asked. “For safety?”

My parents’ heads whipped around to look at me. Sultan Kassim turned to face me, too, his golden eyes flashing. My mother shook her head almost imperceptibly, her eyes wide.

*What?*

I just wanted to ensure we weren’t riding into danger. That was just good sense, not politics. There were bandits and thieves out there. Our own soldiers could protect us until we reached the border, but I wanted to know we would be protected after that.

“Will there be—”

“She’s never left Satra before,” Mother interrupted, moving to stand next to my throne. “She’s just a little nervous about being on the road.” She gave a high laugh.

I furrowed my brows at her, then looked back at the sultan. “Actually, I wondered how many of your soldiers would be meeting us.”

“You needn’t worry about your safety, Princess Zadie,” Sultan Kassim replied with a tight smile. He still didn’t elaborate or confirm how many soldiers there would be. From the looks of the treasure on display in the throne room, there were at least fifty chests traveling with us, and many more

containing priceless art and other luxuries. If they were going to be on display, we'd need at least as many soldiers.

“Would you like to see the rest of the dowry?” Father made swift work of changing the subject. I closed my mouth with a flash of irritation as everyone turned away once more.

“Yes, let's. Lead the way.”

My father walked Sultan Kassim to the edge of the throne room, where the lids of each chest were thrown open to display the treasure inside. Umar jumped down from his throne and scampered off after them. They walked from chest to chest, admiring the heaped jewels and piles of gold plates and coins glittering in the sunlight.

“What did I tell you about talking?” Mother hissed through a smile as she remained standing next to my chair.

“I waited until I was spoken to—”

“Smile.”

“What?”

“Smile. Stop looking so miserable.”

“I am smiling. Besides, he's not even looking.” I forced the corners of my mouth farther up anyway. “What's the problem?”

“The problem is he shouldn't be here, Zadie.”

How Mother managed to talk without moving her lips from their fixed smile was beyond me.

“What do you mean?”

“Quiet. They're coming back.”

The two sultans returned to the thrones, Umar still trailing behind them.

“I also have ten purebred Khirideshi stallions in the stables for you,” my father said.

Kassim raised his eyebrows at this news.

“But I hope everything you have seen here is to your liking.”

“Well, I shall have my valuators check through first—”

“Of course, of course.” Father nodded amenably.

Kassim's eyes locked onto mine, as if weighing up something internally. I knew I should probably break his gaze and look down at the floor demurely, but I couldn't. My lips parted slightly.

He was the first to look away.

“Yes. I'm happy for this marriage to go ahead as planned,” he concluded.

*Hold on... What? The marriage has been in question this whole time?*

My mother's shoulders relaxed.

"We are so pleased to hear that." Father sounded as relieved as Mother looked. Had they known all along what it meant for Kassim to come in person?

Kassim nodded. "We'll keep the same date for two months' time – on All Spirits Day."

"That is perfectly agreeable to us." My father smiled broadly. "It'll give Lalana..." He winced at his error, "Zadie time to adjust to her new home."

Part of me was grateful I had passed the test and lived up to the long shadow Lalana had cast. But Kassim had only seen me all dressed up in finery and slathered in makeup. He'd never seen me looking like, well...me. Would the advantageous political alliance and the chests of treasure be enough to keep the marriage in place when he'd originally been promised the most beautiful girl in the kingdom?

I hoped it would be. After all, he'd just accepted those terms.

And he didn't know it yet, but Kassim would be getting something much better than beauty. A future sultanah who actually knew and cared about how the kingdom was run.

"Shall we meet with my vizier to discuss the new trade agreement?" Father clapped his hands together. "I'll arrange for some refreshments, then perhaps we can visit the stables to look at those stallions."

I stood to follow, but Mother grabbed my wrist in a vice-like grip and pulled me closer to her.

"Shouldn't I go with them?" I asked. "I have ideas for the trade agreement, especially about how we can use the port in Astaran to—"

"Actually, I was hoping Sultanah Indira might join us." Sultan Kassim turned back to us, his amber eyes coming to rest on Mother.

My heart swelled and I yanked my arm back, looking pointedly at my mother. I knew it. This was a sultan who would treat his sultanah fairly.

Mother's painted lips formed a perfect O-shape, her eyes widening in surprise. "Me?"

"Indira?" My father echoed, sounding just as confused, his brow creased. He looked suspiciously in my direction, as though I might somehow be responsible for such a request.

"If it's no trouble." Kassim inclined his head. "I have some questions about magical artifacts, and I've heard the sultanah is something of an expert on the subject."

Mother's hand flew to the talismans and amulets around her neck, the chains clinking loudly as she bundled them together.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Ambar, the merchant Lalana had fled the palace to be with, had sourced most of my mother's magical objects.

But, of course, Kassim didn't know that.

Father cleared his throat. "There are plenty in the dowry, as discussed—"

"Of course, of course." Kassim held his hand up. "I'm interested in developing Astaran's mystical acquisitions program, and I have a few specific questions about talismans, which I hope your wife might be able to help me with."

A *mystical acquisitions program*? I frowned. Nothing in my reading about Astaran had suggested the sultan was interested in magical artifacts. I cast a look back at my mother, still clutching at the talismans around her neck, her cheeks pink. She was clearly flustered by Kassim's unexpected request.

But pleasure swelled in my chest. Not only had the sultan defied my parents' expectations by insisting my mother join in discussions about the dowry, he had acknowledged the expertise she had to offer. Once we were outside the confines of my parents' palace, I was sure he'd come to see that I was an expert in some things, too. Perhaps he'd listen to my suggestions regarding Astaran's port once we were alone.

"It's settled then." Recovering himself, my father put his arm around the sultan's shoulders and began to lead him away. "Indira will join us for refreshments in the garden room, and she can happily answer any questions of yours. We can take a look at those stallions afterward."

"I'll come with you," I said hopefully, taking a step after them.

"There's no need, Zadie," Mother said in a strained voice, grabbing my arm and pulling me back to her side. "You will return to your chambers to ensure all of your belongings are ready to go." She lowered her voice. "Just be glad your chatter didn't put him off. And make sure your handmaids touch up your makeup before you leave. You're sweating it all off."

I frowned, about to raise my objections, when a small hand tugged at my sleeve, making me stop.

Umar looked up at me, his eyes full of tears. "Do you have to leave now, Zadie? We can't ride the ponies anymore?"

"Yes. Your sister is leaving to get married," Mother cut in before I could answer. "It's a happy day," she added when his lower lip began to tremble.

She shot a stern look back in my direction when I didn't immediately agree. "Zadie, your handmaids are waiting for you."

They emerged from the shadows, waiting to lead me back to my chambers. I hovered, casting one last wistful look after the sultan and my father.

"*Zadie*." Mother pinched my arm, fixing a smile on her face as Kassim turned back to see why she hadn't followed. "Do as you're told. Before the sultan changes his mind."

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Elm and Helena have been friends since before they were old enough to read. Their mothers were friends before that, and their grandmothers were friends before that.

Over the years, they've started a school magazine on literature, hosted Alan Rickman and Pirates of the Caribbean-themed sleepovers, run text-based RPG forums set in fantasy worlds, and co-founded a website about making more room for books in your life.

Some might say they were destined to end up writing together.

Today, having ended up living in the same city in Scotland, they're both still mad about books. They both love fairy tales, strong female leads, and hate-to-love romances, so these feature in all the stories they write. Recent fantasy books they haven't been able to stop chatting about include those by Sarah J. Maas, Holly Black, and Naomi Novik.

If you want to chat books or anything else with Elm or Helena, the best thing to do is to send one of them an email, or you social media butterflies can also connect with them online.

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